Drawn to the Blood

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Drawn to the Blood

by Anonymous

Summary

Will was a closed book from before their first meeting. Dulled by suppressants but weaned off them when he had decided to work for Hannibal. He had allowed himself to be trained up, to use his natural instincts to fight his own battles. No children, no bond. Nothing to tie him to anywhere or anything. A man who was a cop until he wasn’t, until Hannibal stripped him free of the suppressants, of the anger; until he built him up to the masterpiece he was now.

Mob boss x omegaverse au

Notes

This is more or less written - I'm just tidying it up.

Please do check the warnings for anything that you're uncomfortable reading.

Thank you :)

Chapter 1

Hannibal walked calmly through the slap-dash-departed warehouse. The smell of rubber from tires pulling away still warmed the air. Inside the building the scent of blood hung around, sinking into the damp air and tinging it rancid. Hannibal had tracked Will to a locked room, as his men – just Tier and Brown – circled the rest of the warehouse, looking for any stray leftovers.

Cordell, Verger's favoured henchman was face up on the ground at Will's feet, eyes bulged in fear, the open mouth of his throat still oozing. The left side of his face was caught; skin bunched in open tracks, his teeth on show where a chunk of his jowl had been bitten clean off.

Will stood in the corner, mouth slick with blood. His hands too. His favoured knife that he always kept strapped to his hip was glinting tight in his hand, dripping warm blood down to the floor. Will was both stiff and quivering, eyes wide in his bloody face.

'Something went wrong tonight,' Hannibal said, waiting on an explanation. Will should have been driving out to a secure location, keeping an eye on a drop. Keeping Hannibal's money secure. He didn't like the company of other men and had always worked better alone. Was usually quick enough to move in and out of the shadows, his finely attuned senses a brilliant reflex against danger.

Tonight his scent was all wrong. The dark floral musk that would permeate Hannibal's locked bedroom every so often was tinged in something metallic. His shirt was undone almost to his stomach, bearing a deep wedge of smooth skin, wet with perspiration, the tautness of muscle flexing beneath the slick red of Cordell's blood. His pants were undone and pulled open, the buckle to his belt hanging loose. Hannibal took in the sight of him, not allowing himself to breathe it in too deep. From outside the room Matthew's footsteps wandered by, calling out an all clear. He didn't approach the room, picking up on the scent.

'They induced a fake heat,' Will was saying, still mostly in his own mind. Hannibal followed his lidded eyes to the syringe sitting empty beside the corpse on the ground. Will was standing in front of a weathered medical chair. On each arm rest were restraints that had been torn open and now dangled like tendons from the metal frame. Will must've been tied to it, must have got himself loose somehow. 'It's burning me up.'

'Then you need to go home, Will. I'll take you back to your house.' Hannibal drew in the sight of Will, staring down at Cordell. He was still blinking slowly, like he was trying to understand the sight in front of him. 'Just me. No one else.'

'Someone set this in motion,' Will said, his breathing laboured as he took in the sight of Hannibal, like he suddenly realised he was there. Hannibal stepped closer, close enough that the acidity of the scent burned his nose. 'Someone tried to set me up.'

'An inside job.' He curled his hands over Will's flushed cheeks. He could smell sweat, Cordell's blood dripping from Will's mouth and his scent warm, sweet and thick in the air. Will in heat was a new experience for Hannibal, although this was induced and would last no

longer than twelve hours. Hungover tomorrow. Will managed the jazz club Hannibal owned, and he was always attentive; always present in the office when he wasn't working overtime elsewhere. Hannibal would have to send someone else to check up on things for him. Now, he pushed back Will's hair, fisting just lightly and fighting against the sensation of an unbonded omega before him. Teeth in Will's violent throat. Subdue. Fuck. Breed. Will sighed, his eyes closing, his neck tilting just-so, just for Hannibal's pleasure.

Hannibal steadied his hands, carefully zipping Will's pants closed, frowning about the implications in the scene before him. Will was hard, but Hannibal just skimmed his knuckles over the covered flesh, making like the gasping sounds held little effect. He buckled his pants neatly, sliding the metal spike through the leather belt. His own arousal was growing hazy. He knew Will so intimately, but never in heat. It was tempting.

'Let me drive you home.'

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Abigail Hobbs walked as fast as she could away from campus. She was in trouble, and as hard as she had tried to force repentance, it just hadn't come. She was fresh out of a meeting, one where she had been offered one more chance if she was willing to take the rest of the semester off. *Sometimes omegas need a little more help,* they told her. Time away was time to decompress. Time to think about her actions. Time for the latest spurned alpha to calm down at least. She hadn't stolen *anything* from him this time. She had just threatened.

The car was parked in the spot she was asked to be picked up from. It was like middle school, only it wasn't the wrath of her father she was having to deal with these days. He had kept her subdued and dutiful, but he'd been dead seven years now and she was fully grown. Abigail could hear her name being called faintly as she yanked on the door handle, the soles of her winter boots sliding on ice. The black door pulled open as she steadied herself, the scent of artificial vanilla and warm leather hitting her in the face and soothing her burning lungs.

Will Graham was staring at her wearily from behind the wheel. He was sharply dressed, blue suit and a black shirt beneath his overcoat. The last time she had seen him had been a few months back. It had been late, she had been creeping home from a friend's house and he'd been sitting in the kitchen with Hannibal, a bottle of wine between them and his head on his arms as he laughed at something Hannibal said.

'Are you on babysitting duty now?' she asked, because she enjoyed seeing the tightness of his shoulders, the way his eyes flickered at the comment. She breathed deep as her heartrate slowed. 'Hannibal working hard?'

'He always does,' Will said, his eyes moving instead over Abigail's shoulder. She found herself jolting as someone tapped on the window. Abigail twisted her head to see Dr Bloom peering through the now wound-down window.

'Abigail,' Her voice was soft and gentle as she spoke, as if Abigail hadn't darted from the meeting she'd personally arranged. 'Think over what was said. What you're doing is dangerous, you need to refocus your studies.'

‘I know,’ she said, trying for sweetness. It worked when she was younger. Not so much now. Alana held her face with concern, before her eyes swept over to Will. Abigail watched Alana study him, her brow raised as if in surprise. Her features cooled to neutrality. Perhaps she had been expecting Hannibal. They all knew he was her guardian. They all knew he owned half of Baltimore, *and* everyone that mattered.

‘I’m worried about you. This is abnormal behaviour.’ Alana’s voice cut down low. Her eyes were trying to engage, but Abigail was all out of care. She didn’t want to explain. Alphas didn’t. Beta men didn’t. Will, the weirdest omega she had ever met, he never explained a damn thing either. Dr Bloom was just a beta with a soft spot for omegas. She would never get it.

‘Are you her guardian?’ the car rumbled to life as Dr Bloom turned her attention to Will, his wrist twisting as he set the car into ignition. Abigail watched as an invisible tension seemed to tug between the two of them.

‘You already know that I’m not,’ Will said. ‘I’m due elsewhere. Can we wrap this up?’

‘I’d like to come see you, Abigail. Keep in touch. If you need—’

‘Help, yeah. I know.’ Abigail rolled the window up, waving brightly as Will pulled away from the edge of the road. Alana Bloom, Abigail’s appointed college therapist was left standing, hands shoved into her coat pockets as they tore away from campus.

‘Are you going to say anything?’ she asked when they had been driving for fifteen minutes. It was an hour-thirty back to Hannibal’s place, which meant that Will had specifically been asked pick her up. Deliver her back. He’d been the one to drop her off at college in the first place. He hadn’t hugged her goodbye, but he had given her a huge box of her favourite candy and a rape alarm.

‘It’s really not my place,’ Will said, changing lanes. She watched the way his fingers flexed and unfurled on the on the steering wheel. He was uncomfortable and trying to form the right words. Abigail was learning to read people, read their movements. Hannibal had told her to lean into her instincts that way, in the summer between boarding school and college.

‘He sent you so we could have an omega to omega chat. You’re the only other one he keeps company with,’ she smirked when she saw his fingers flex on the wheel again. ‘He barely keeps company with me.’

‘Omega to omega you’re being a fucking idiot.’

‘Omega to omega am I as much of an idiot as you are? At least I don’t screw around with an unmated alpha.’ She laughed at the reaction; the pull of the car as he tore through the lanes, overtaking before he got to their exit. The anger was burning him up, but he wouldn’t do anything about it. She watched his reaction the way Hannibal would. She watched the breath he took in, and then as he slowed down to a reasonable speed, the way his breath unspooled the tension in his body.

‘I think we’re both idiots,’ he said eventually. ‘But if you’re going to screw with the system you have to make sure it doesn’t screw you back.’

‘Is that something I need to be taught or are you going to tell me?’ She asked, and noticed the weary expression fold up onto his features again. All she had done was pursue smug alphas on campus through social media. When they came over to spend some time *getting to know an omega* she knocked them out with booze and sleeping tablets and stole their money. Usually the embarrassment of being semi catfished and audaciously robbed by an omega was enough to keep them quiet. The last one had admitted it all to his daddy and got her into trouble.

‘I just mean that you’re being watched. Not just by the school. Other people are going to be interested because of your association to Hannibal. You need to behave.’ It wasn’t much of a dress down and he was hardly one to talk. She knew what Will did for Hannibal. He was on the books at the manager of the jazz club, but that wasn’t the half of it. He was, however, the only one to ever show her decency. She wasn’t sure if it was their shared status or something else. Hannibal’s inner circle was mainly alpha with a few beta males for show. She didn’t really like being in the house if Will wasn’t there.

The silence was mainly companionable once he stopped arguing with her about changing the radio station. They settled on 70’s rock – neither of their favourite, but she didn’t want to argue with him anymore. By the time he pulled up to the gates of Hannibal’s house, she was dreading going inside. She knew he wasn’t stopping because he hadn’t swung into the driveway. She’d have to face Hannibal alone.

‘Can we talk later?’ She asked. ‘Like about stuff.’

‘Stuff?’ His eyebrows raised in amusement. ‘Depends on what the stuff is. There are other omegas. Or Dr Bloom.’

‘We’re alike, you and me. I want to be like you,’ she said, turning in her seat to look at him. ‘No rules. No need for an alpha. I get to play with them. I *like* playing with them. You should see what they look like when they realise I’ve taken everything from them. They’d rape me if I didn’t put out, if I didn’t blackmail them. You know how it goes.’

‘Right.’ Her comment had made him uncomfortable; she could see it in how his shoulders had drawn into a rigid line beneath his woollen coat. ‘I still think there are other omegas you could talk to about this. I’m not good at the soft stuff.’

‘Maybe.’ She looked at him and smiled, despite the nerves inside. Male omegas were meant to be even more into their feelings than the female counterparts, but Will always seemed to shut her down when she tried going deep with him. ‘How pissed is Hannibal?’

‘You might be surprised. Get out. I can’t be late.’ She wondered where he was going. She wished she could go with him, just to see him in the moment. Sometimes he would stay over, down in Hannibal’s suite on the ground floor and that was the only time she had scented him outside of his general gentle scent. Technically she wasn’t allowed in there, but Hannibal encouraged her curiosity. She knew the code. She could smell omega in the bedroom. She wanted to smell like that for someone too. For it to be illicit and exciting. Hidden away in

bedrooms and removed everywhere else. So that no one knew what she really smelled like. So that no one would dare to ask.

Abigail looked up at the house once Will had driven off. It was a tall, bricked building with large windows and a gated entrance. It only added to her feelings of anticipation. She wondered sometimes if he bought the house just for how imposing it was. It had a front door that she had to forcibly push open with two hands. The doors opened onto a hallway, a large staircase directly in front of her. Either side were two living rooms, the one on the left lead through to Hannibal's private suite. She walked through the one to the right; it led into the opulent dining room, and then further into the dark and shining kitchen.

She thought she might have found Hannibal there. He was home, Will had told him as much. And if he wasn't working, if he hadn't retired to his suite; then he would be in the kitchen. She remembered last Christmas; Hannibal *always* hosted a grandiose party on Christmas Eve. She'd sat on the stairs with Will, the two of them seeking quiet from the incessant socialising. Hannibal had been in the kitchen all night, talking music and culture and all the smart things that she had never been interested in.

Will had split his whiskey with her, even though she was underage, and didn't like the taste. One of the young alpha men that was always sniffing around on the outskirts of Hannibal's inner circle was eyeing her up. Will had sat purposely beside her all night so that he wouldn't approach. Will was omega, which made him deferential, but he had Hannibal's ear and that scared most of them off.

Outside it was starting to snow, covering the ground for the season. She stared at the back garden, at the white blanket building from the ground up, and took in a breath. She wondered how angry Hannibal was. Education was important. That's what he had told her before she left for college last year. They weren't real family, but he was all that she had. He'd killed her father after a betrayal and taken her in aged twelve. Shipped her off to boarding school where she was raised to be a decent and painfully bland young woman. She was taught what an omega should be like. She remembered the day she first met Will. She was fifteen and miserable. When she found out his status, she realised dutiful and decent were worlds away from what she actually wanted. She could be something else. She could be like him.

Abigail walked around the black island, extravagant in the middle of the kitchen and found her way to the other side of the house. The black heavy door to Hannibal's private suite was closed, but she could hear music playing from his office directly above her.

She climbed the stairs to the first floor. Her bedroom was along the hallway, along with a living room with a large TV that didn't get much viewing, a couple of guest bedrooms and Hannibal's work office. She stood outside for a moment before pushing it open, swallowing down her nerves.

'Abigail.' Hannibal looked up from his desk. He was in shirt sleeves and a waistcoat. A fussy tie knotted at his throat. She took a seat opposite and waited for the berating. Her hands fidgeted nervously between her tight knees, but she put to a brave face. She half wished Will was around. She would always fear Hannibal a little, knowing how he had killed her father.

There was something of a wry smile on his face rather than disappointment. ‘You’ve been a naughty girl.’

‘Is it wrong to lead someone down the path they were already heading?’ she leaned back in her chair and watched a small smile play on his lips. He was impressed whereas Will had been weary. Suddenly any fear that she had of his reaction dissipated. Maybe it was the scent of him, rich and heady. Maybe it was that she remembered how often he had pressed on her curiosity in the past. ‘That alpha would have taken what he wanted.’

‘If you’re going to blackmail an alpha for their money, I would suggest you don’t get caught in the process next time,’ he said lightly. He leaned back in his chair, his eyes alight. There was a soothing swell her chest like she used to get with her alpha father when she had pleased him. ‘You’ve plenty to learn.’

‘I don’t want to go back to school. I want to be here.’ She was a psychology student. A half semester into her second year. The classes were filled with omegas, all of them desperate to understand their psyche, but Abigail just wanted to play. She wanted the power. Wanted to unarm people like Will.

‘You need to finish school,’ he said, eyes scanning hers. He wasn’t angry at all, she realised. He was watching her as she watched him. Will was like that too.

‘Finish school and find an alpha?’ She was young and pretty and had a womb so what else could she do? Dr Bloom was there, with her keen interest in *omega rights,* in fighting for equality but with alphas like Hannibal always pulling the strings what else was there? They weren’t that far removed from arranged marriages. Male omegas had it worse, the freakiest of the bunch, the rarest. At least she didn’t have it that bad.

‘An alpha? You have time for that business later. First finish school. Then a career.’ Hannibal’s long fingers splayed on the smooth sheen of his desk. Neat nails tapping a gentle rhythm. She watched, half entranced. ‘Do you have plans for the future?’

‘I want to be like Will,’ she said, watching the way he sat back in his chair, his fingers stilling. His eyes seemed to glisten with interest. ‘He’s his own person. He gets to do what he wants.’

‘Within reason.’

‘Within your reason?’ She tilted her head, studying him. They were playing again, she could hear the lightness in his tone. She listened.

‘Within the reasons that he has set out.’ Hannibal paused. His hands folded in the middle of the desk as he studied her. ‘You wish to work for me like Will?’

‘Yes.’ She smiled at him, wondering where the anger was and why she had expected it in her first place. His anger was usually fed through Will, who did his bidding. Everyone knew that. Everyone that knew anything about Hannibal Lecter’s dealings knew they were in for something horrific if Will came knocking. ‘Can I? I’ve been suspended for the semester. I have time to learn.’

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Hannibal Lecter invested in assets. He didn't invest in friendship; he had never really seen the point. He invested his money, his resources, his wide insidious network of wealthy alphas desperate for power, for wealth, for notoriety. It was a well-oiled machine.

He helped the mayor win the most recent election.

He helped a banker cover his tracks after an obscene amount of money went missing.

He helped take over several properties that were in dire need of rebranding and management. (The previous owners were suitably complimentary in the press regarding the change in ownership.)

Hannibal was powerful and he was alpha. He had the ear of some of the most respected and powerful people in the Baltimore, and they had their hand in his wallet if he so desired. He was charitable until he wasn't; when rudeness disturbed his status quo.

The ultimate humiliation for an alpha would always be harm at the hands of someone from a lower status. A lowly and soft omega cutting their fingers off one by one, gutting them like fish when their screams became mundane and monotonous? The thought made Hannibal lips curl into a delighted grin. Will could be feral when he needed to.

Will was neither lowly or soft, but he was omega and his bloodlust and thirst seemed tightly connected to his status. Hannibal could have persuaded him to bond when their paths first crossed, but male omegas could lose so much of themselves when mated. Will's differences were what made him interesting; what made him savage.

Hannibal's men were all unmated alphas. They were young, virile. Wound up and easy to train. When he finally lost them to a mate he replaced them with ease. There were always so many men eager to work for him, for the chance of glory, of violence, of power. They enjoyed the comradery, they enjoyed the dark scent of Will when he brushed past them, never looking them in the eye, never thinking to.

Hannibal had been in meetings all afternoon. He chaired a board meeting regarding equipment he had purchased for the local hospital. It had been paid for and sponsored by his own charity, his own money, and therefore it was on his terms how it was best used. His attorneys made sure of it. He spoke with a young man that had twisted himself into a web of lies and grasped Hannibal's hand in a deal that he had no way of backing out of. He had dinner in the restaurant he owned downtown, alone, with his eyes on the customers in front of him. He preferred it that way. All the while he thought of Abigail, of what she had said to him in his office earlier that day. She was changing, ready to be changed.

Late that night he found Will sitting on the furthest corner of his bed when he walked through the private suit and to his bedroom, his house closed up for the night and his men sent home. His suite was sacred ground; a private office, a large dark bedroom leading into a roomy ensuite. No one was allowed in without his permission. Will had never asked for permission.

His suit jacket was sprawled onto the dark leather chair in the corner, his shoes tucked neatly beneath it. He was peeling the watch from his wrist when he looked up to see Hannibal staring at him. He wasn't granted a smile. Will had a room upstairs, across the spiralled landing looking out to the front of the house, but he rarely slept there. He was either warming Hannibal's bed or driving back to his own house, a sad little thing in the middle of the woods. Hannibal had only been inside one time, after the incident six weeks back.

'Abigail,' Will said, looking up for answers before they could even start on polite conversation. Hannibal had hoped to abort that conversation for a day or so. 'What are you doing about her?'

'She wants to be just like you,' Hannibal mused, disliking the accusatory tone in Will's voice. Abigail was Hannibal's responsibility through the death of her father, but he'd much rather guide her than raise her firmly like Will would insist.

'She's nineteen. She doesn't know what she fucking wants,' Will said. His brow furrowed and his hands slid into his own hair. Hannibal watched the internal struggle with curiosity. He understood more about Will than anybody but at times he was aware of secrets buried so deep, he wondered if they would ever resurface.

'Did you get what you wanted when you were nineteen?' Hannibal asked, mostly to needle. Will was a closed book from before their first meeting. Dulled by suppressants but weaned off them when he had decided to work for Hannibal. He had allowed himself to be trained up, to use his natural instincts to fight his own battles. No children, no bond. Nothing to tie him to anywhere or anything. A guy who was a cop until he wasn't, until Hannibal stripped him free of the suppressants, of the anger, until he built him up to the masterpiece he was now.

'Did you?' Will clipped back, eyes sliding away when he caught the smirk that peeled onto Hannibal's lips. Hannibal started to undress, breathing slow and deep. Will's scent was emanating sweetly. He'd sweated away his cologne throughout the day and Hannibal had a keen nose. Will's perceptive glance watched him from his position on the bed.

Will was on birth control, washed with a scent neutralizer every morning, and doused himself with an expensive cologne that Hannibal had gifted him. The dark notes matched his natural scent, heightened during spikes in his hormones. Hannibal felt the biological pull to bond with him, but they'd fought against their instincts. It was far more fun to play like this.

'I presume you'll be taking a leave of absence soon,' Hannibal said, changing the subject. He stood in front of his closet, carefully unbuttoning his shirt, studying the tired reflection of the man on the bed. Will was still stooped over the side, elbows on his knees. He tilted his head up in Hannibal's direction, eyes scanning until his lips finally tilted into a smile. He rolled onto his back, hands falling neatly on his stomach.

'Bloodlust was getting to me tonight,' Will admitted. Hannibal had sent him out to convince a wavering participant to stay in the safe house Hannibal had set up for him. Hannibal had been tight on telling Will the facts, it made the torture easier. Though with the prickle of his heat looming he was a lot easier to persuade. Hannibal appreciated a bloodhound that didn't need checking up on. 'You can smell it already?'

Hannibal laid beside him on the bed. He was an unmated alpha tamed by an unmated omega, one that had walked into his private rooms and laid out on the bed, his gentle scent starting to spread over the sheets. The audacity cooled Hannibal, a relieving chill against the heady scent Will was emanating. He didn't tilt his neck towards Hannibal but allowed Hannibal's hand to rest atop of his on his stomach, their fingers linking autonomously.

'You could stay here. You know that wouldn't be an issue for me.' They had shared that one heat together; the artificial one that Verger had sent him into. It wasn't real, hadn't lasted past the one time Hannibal knotted him, but it had felt real at the time. He'd bitten through the collar of Will's shirt to stop himself piercing skin.

'Of course not. What alpha wouldn't want an omega begging for their knot and teeth in their neck.' Hannibal allowed himself the pleasure of imagining it. There was a surface attractiveness to it, even if he couldn't quite indulge himself in thinking of Will that way. He was strong-willed but brittle. Hannibal enjoyed watching him snap from time to time, enjoyed the moments when Will allowed him to pick up the pieces in the privacy of his rooms.

'I don't see it that way,' Hannibal said, knowing that simplicity worked best when Will was wired like this.

'I do.' Will swallowed. 'And all of this-' his finger waved between them, 'would become nothing but me being your little bitch to breed and-'

'Shh.' Hannibal had heard enough. Had heard it all before and Will could get particularly nasty this side of his heat. It was hardly worth arguing over. 'You'll be in the throes of it by tomorrow evening I imagine.'

'Fuck.' Hannibal wasn't sure whether the cursing was at his prediction or the hand stroking over the front of Will's pants. Just the light trace of a finger against the shape if his cock. He looked down at Will, cheeks flushed, lip tucked between white teeth until he was able to speak again. 'Verger is going to be at the opera tomorrow night. Did you know? You need—'

Will stopped talking when Hannibal's hand peeled down the teeth of his zipper and curled around his cock. Hannibal briefly took in the announcement. Mason wasn't one to enjoy opera; he preferred to be centre of attention at every moment, which meant he was only there to gain access to Hannibal's ear. A threat, he imagined. Cordell was a big loss.

'I'll take Abigail with me. Her curiosity is worth paying an interest in.' Hannibal pulled his hand away and leaned over. Will's phone was resting beside his watch on the nightstand. Hands tugged at his waist as he set a timer on Will's phone. He was pulled down for a wet kiss, an edge of desperation that had his body reacting. Hannibal didn't like the idea of caving to his own biological whims anymore that Will did, but an omega beneath him, scenting and so close to their heat was hard to resist. 'No talk of work until the timer is up.'

'We don't have to talk about anything,' Will said, hands fisted tight in Hannibal's hair. 'Just fuck me.'

Will was still there the next morning when the alarm had gone off, a warm weight pressed against Hannibal's back as they stirred. He was slower in his movements. He took a shower, used the shampoo that Hannibal left out for him and dressed in the same clothes as the night before. He refused to keep any of his clothes down here.

Breakfast was simple; sausage, eggs and coffee. Hannibal could hear Abigail moving around upstairs, but it was still too early for her to grace them with her presence. Despite his shower, Will was scenting stronger than normal, his heat fast approaching and warming the air. Hannibal tried to feed him up with more protein, to keep him well fed before his heat took over.

'I always crave cereal before,' Will said lightly, gifting Hannibal with the tiniest slither of insight into his true heat. He would lock himself up in that little house in the woods and see it out by himself. 'I want sugar not protein.'

'I'd suggest you reapply your neutraliser if you plan on going anywhere but home.' Hannibal studied the stony look he received as Will drank his coffee and poked at the eggs. A pre-heat omega was tempting to unmated alpha's; could send them rutting. Part of Hannibal would love to see them try. After what had happened with Cordell, Hannibal was under no illusions of Will's tenacity even when compromised by his hormones.

'Be careful tonight. Mason is up to something and that makes him dangerous,' Will changed the subject, no longer able to maintain eye contact. His cheeks held a biological flush and Hannibal found himself watching the shallow rise and fall of his chest. He was affected already by being in Hannibal's presence. 'Is it wise to take Abigail?'

'Will.' Hannibal grabbed his wrist and watched the flutter of his eyelashes, felt the dance of his heartbeat quickening at his pulse point. Will had schooled his body to remain taut, but he couldn't stop the smaller things. It was stirring something up in Hannibal too. 'Look after yourself. Call me when you've finished.'

'I need to finish a few things at the club,' Will said. He would feel better once he was out of Hannibal's house, away from the scent and influence of an unmated alpha, and at this time of the morning there would be no one else around at the club to interfere. 'Don't fuck anything up. Don't fuck it up with Verger. Something about this puts me on edge.'

'I'm going to enjoy the opera. He will be only a small part of the evening.' One day he'd like to take Will. Take him and have people wonder why his bloodhound was beside him. An alpha and omega professional not personal, not until the doors were locked and bolted.

'Enjoy the opera, then,' Will said, managing a tight smile. He poured his half-finished eggs into the bin and dropped his plate into the sink. There was no one else around, no Abigail, not other associates. He could lean in for a kiss. He'd certainly been desperate enough for some last night. Hannibal had listened to the desperate panting when he'd moved inside Will, could play it back gasp for gasp in his head. He kept the width of the kitchen island apart now.

'Goodbye Will.'

Hannibal met Abigail on his way out. She was fresh-faced and lively with a good night's sleep behind her, dark hair hanging in wet strands across her shoulders. Her nose flared, catching Will's scent that hung in the air. When she smirked, he granted her one back. Will wholly underestimated her.

'I want to speak with him. Is he still here?'

'You'll have to be a little more precise, Abigail,' he told her, guiding her to the kitchen where coffee was still sitting in the pot. Hannibal's wariness over taking on a child had peeled back to reveal a natural curiosity. She had been meek at first, the devious side hidden behind genuine grief for her father. Recently she had revealed herself to him more and more and he enjoyed what he had seen.

He had kept a close eye on her through Will because they were both omegas and she needed one of power to guide her. And because Will had no one, just as Hannibal had no one, as Abigail had no one. It was the tightest bond they had.

Abigail had proven particularly cunning a few months into her college stay with her odd pursuing of alphas for their money through blackmail. A useless psychology degree was paving the way for her to assess her peers, to see where she wanted to stand in the world. Beside him would be preferable. He would need someone to hand the business over to one day.

'Will he be back later?' He watched her pour a large mug of coffee, even as his phone vibrated in his pocket. Soon the house would be filled with men that worked for him, watched over him and his business. Alphas, though they wouldn't touch Abigail, not if they wanted to survive.

'Not for a few days.' Hannibal saw the shadows by the front door as he stood in his foyer. His driver had arrived to take him to his next meeting with a city councillor who need Hannibal's help, and his money. Tobias, his pernicious lawyer would be meeting him there. He watched Abigail drop down into the same seat Will had been perched on not twenty minutes before. 'We're off to the opera tonight. I'll have a dress ready for you.'

'The opera?' she looked horrified before her gaze cleared and she realised that opera didn't necessarily mean for the entertainment of it. Business happened everywhere. Her mouth peeled into a grin. Far too much enthusiasm. She'd need to calm that down.

Abigail waited until the house was cleared. Hannibal was going to be in meetings all day, whatever that meant. She knew that he owned people, in the way that he had money and he was willing to share it around for access, for stakes, for property. She knew that he owned a French restaurant downtown, an art gallery, and the jazz club that Will managed. He knew powerful people because he was powerful. Abigail knew that when other powerful, ambitious men took too much of a liking to his business plan that they were quieted in a way that stopped them talking. She knew that Will was his silencer. She knew that her father had been killed for stealing money from Hannibal, for washing it through his business.

She knew where Will lived because she has seen his ID in his wallet one time. If he smelled the way he did that morning and he was going away *for a few days* that meant his heat was coming. She was omega too. She could be with him while other people couldn't. He'd find it harder to lie, he'd have nowhere else to run. She just wanted to talk to him, to know what it was really like to be him.

Hannibal had gifted her a sleek black Jeep a few years ago. She climbed into it and pulled off, aware of another following her. One of Hannibal's men set to follow her every move when she was under his watch. They would steer clear of Will's place. They were alphas, and Will wasn't bonded to Hannibal, but he belonged to him as an employee. Will ranked higher, was better respected to Hannibal's face at least.

Will lived in the middle of nowhere. Through a clearing of trees and into an exposed area was a little white house. It looked, she thought, like somewhere a family should live. An alpha and omega and their two cute kids. Maybe a plain old beta couple. Not somewhere Hannibal's favourite bloodhound should call home.

She parked up behind his car he used for work, as well as a rusted Volvo. She knocked on the screen door with the hand she didn't have shoved into her pocket for warmth. It was icier out here, more exposed. She heard the rumbling of dogs barking even before the door opened and she was encircled by a cluster of furry hounds. She dropped down, losing count after the fifth one pawed at her, tumbling over onto their back for a belly rub. She indulged briefly before looking up.

Will didn't look like himself at all. His hair was usually combed and styled to the side; his suits tailored to his slight build. Now his shower-damp hair curled up in all directions. He was in a tight white t-shirt and sweatpants. He was pushing on a pair of glasses as he opened the door. She wasn't aware he wore them otherwise. He didn't wear them around Hannibal.

'Abigail… what are you doing here?' he sounded a little sluggish, fresh from a nap or something similar. His eyes had taken on the shiny glaze hers did when heat came. God, it was a pain. She was thinking about suppressants.

She crossed her arms over her chest and stood upright. 'I said I wanted to talk to you. You just dumped me at the gate yesterday and never came back.'

'I can't talk to you right now.' Will whistled and his dogs who'd been rattling around her legs sprung to action and puttered behind him into the house.

'You're going into heat. I know what that's like. Can I come in?' He liked her, was rarely annoyed at her outside of his usual pissy nature. She knew that. And that's why she could push his buttons, it's why she had decided today would actually be a good day to have the conversation. He hesitated only briefly before stepping aside.

His house was light and airy, with floorboards that creaked as they walked over them. She walked from the main room into the wider space of the kitchen, hearing Will's bare feet on the floor behind her. He'd been eating cereal, she realised, the kiddie stuff full of sugar. She had a sudden memory of being six and thrusting her hand into the sugary grains, grappling for the toy. She collected them on her windowsill. Little monsters of neon and plastic. They'd

stayed there until her father's death where Hannibal collected her and sent her off to boarding school. She hadn't asked what had happened to her stuff.

'I won't stay long,' she said, wondering how long it would take for the heat to take over. She generally had a few hours of pre-heat before two days of gasping loneliness. She had only been with one beta boy, someone from college, but not during her heat. That was sacred. Will didn't seem to hold much about his status as sacred, but even he didn't share them with anyone. He'd be mated otherwise.

'I'd rather be alone if we're being honest.'

'I'm surprised Hannibal keeps you around if you're not, you know, if you haven't been *fixed.'* She poked because she could. Will was probably working hard enough to keep the heat at bay that he had little hope of lying. A perfect opportunity to talk where he couldn't cage up. 'That's dangerous.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.' The brief glance in her direction suggested he knew exactly what she was talking about. She'd teased him about it only yesterday. Still he shovelled frosted cornflakes into his mouth and chewed so hard her own jaw ached in sympathy.

'If you're having heats it means you're still intact. I know you're not on suppressants. Which is dumb.' She watched the ire fold over his face, how his tongue poked at his cheek as he assessed her words. Eventually his spoon dropped into his bowl with a clatter and he turned to look at her.

'We're careful. Birth control, sometimes condoms. If he knots I take Plan B. We don't bite. We don't share heats.' Will waved a hand dismissively while Abigail looked on, unable to quite believe how honest he was being.

'You let him *knot* you?' Abigail didn't mean to sound so accusatory, but Will was so rarely open with her. And she'd always been taught that you didn't take a knot unless you were bonded. You *could* do it, but why would you? It was sacred. She imagined painful too.

'Not always.' His eyes darted towards her and then away. He didn't look guilty, but she knew he had read her thought process. He was *really good* at reading her thought process. Male omegas were a bit like that, but he seemed unnervingly insightful at times. 'Depends on how I feel.'

'And he respects that?'

'Would I still be there otherwise?'

'Doesn't matter if he's an alpha. They don't usually care.'

'Have you ever—' Will paused. His fingers were curled tight to his spoon again as he looked away, pressing flakes down into milk. 'I'm sure the internet could answer all of these questions for you. You don't need me to explain.'

‘Didn’t you ever want something else? Aren’t we supposed to want mates? Wouldn’t it make this part easier.’ She looked him over, at the curls of dark hair sticking to his forehead. ‘It’s not just about making babies these days if that’s what concerns you.’

‘You have to do what is right for you, Abigail. No one can make that decision for you.’ He’d blanked on the baby-making part, which was fair. As a male omega, rare as it was, it was even rarer to find one that wasn’t mated off with kids. Will wasn’t old, but most had popped a few out in their twenties. He’d turned thirty nearly two years ago.

‘We all want someone to look after us deep down, don’t we?’

‘I don’t think that’s something restricted by status,’ he told her. ‘Everyone wants someone to care about them.’

‘You should be on suppressants if you don’t want heats to be an issue.’ She was fake teasing because she could, because Will had always allowed it with her. When Hannibal would send her away to boarding school, Will would be the one to drive her up, let her unleash her angst at him. She was fully aware of his capabilities. That he wasn’t *just* the manager of a jazz club. He didn’t even like jazz. He’d told her that once.

‘Suppressants are depressants for me. They stop me thinking. They had me on a lot when I was a cop. Like having a brain wrapped in cotton.’ Some jobs it was still legally binding. Couldn’t have an omega running around needing protecting, with all of their hormones all over the place.

‘If I go on suppressants will it do the same?’ she asked. His face turned towards her. She knew it was him, and yet he seemed so different without the suits, with the glasses on his face and the uncombed hair. She wondered if Hannibal had ever seen him like this. It felt intimate, like he was without armour.

‘Everyone responds differently.’ A pause, his eyes evading hers. ‘Are you wanting to go on them?’

‘I wanna be like you. I want to hurt those that *deserve* it. I want to feel powerful even if people don’t think I am. No one thinks I am. They care more about the fact that Hannibal is my guardian and he’s dangerous.’ Will’s eyes were scanning her face even as he refused eye contact and she tried to stop the thrill showing so much. ‘I want them to stop because of me. I want to be dangerous.’

Will was staring at her, taking in her words. His processing had shut down as his pre-heat prickled at his skin, at the outskirts of his mind. She felt embarrassed with the truth sitting easily between them. That’s why she had been experimenting, sweetening up those alphas that expected something of her before she took what she wanted. Money mostly, drugs occasionally, but only to sell onto others. She just liked taking things from others because she could.

‘I think you should give normality a chance first. You’re still so young.’

‘What chance have I at normality? My dad was a thief. Hannibal killed him and wiped out his entire business because he stole from him. It’s not like I can just go out and live a normal life, so I want something else.’

‘Abigail… you don’t need to—'

‘He’s taking me to the opera tonight.’ She watched how Will’s entire body seemed to stiffen. Not a fan of Hannibal’s plan then. She wondered why. She tried to imagine how Hannibal had told him. Did they fight about it? Did they fight over her going? That stirred something up in her gut. ‘Why does that bother you?’

‘He’s meeting with Mason Verger,’ Will said. She noticed how his hair had yet to dry before it was dampening with sweat. She could see it staining his shirt between his shoulder blades where he was hunched over his bowl of cereal. He was fast approaching the thick of it. ‘He shouldn’t be taking you to that.’

‘Would you rather he took you?’ she teased. Goading Will was fun, especially when he had nowhere to run to. Will licked his damp lips, not looking to her but straight ahead instead, at the dated wallpaper of his kitchen.

‘I’m not sure if Verger believes half the shit he spouts or if it’s just to get a rise out of people but he’s of the anachronistic variety. Omegas should be filled and bred and not much else. We’ve…clashed. Hannibal wouldn’t be seen dead taking me as a date anywhere, he especially wouldn’t do it on a night he’s meeting with Mason.’

‘If Mason hates omegas so much, then why would Hannibal take me with him?’

‘Hannibal has a reason for doing everything. He won’t be doing this to put you at risk.’ Will looked at her again, pupils swallowing up the blue of his eyes. His cheeks were flushed, heat rising from his body so much that she could feel it burning next to him. ‘But that doesn’t mean you won’t come to harm.’

‘So I should be careful?’ something akin to excitement pulled in Abigail’s chest at the thought. Her dad had taught her how to hunt, but she wanted to learn from Will properly. How to kill. When he was through to the other side she’d beg him to show her.

‘Abigail, you should be careful. Whatever you do in life, with Hannibal or without. You *have* to be careful.’

Unnerved by the raw edge of his tone she tried to lighten the mood. ‘Omega to omega?’

‘Omega to omega.’ He pushed his bowl away. She could scent him more now than before, the dark perfumed scent was filling the room completely. She put her hand on his tight shoulder and squeezed. She liked being touched through her heats by her omega friends, she thought he’d be the same. He didn’t push her off, even when his muscles tensed.

‘Want me to stay and rub your back?’

‘I’m not starting a fucking heat sorority with you. Go make friends your own age and fuck off,’ he said, with little ammunition. When she laughed, he gave a flicker of a smile back too. It looked painful. ‘But be safe, Abigail. Be really careful tonight. Keep your mouth shut but your eyes open.’

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Hannibal could smell Will on Abigail when he saw her later that day. He breathed it in as he stood in the doorway to her bedroom, watching her stare at her own reflection in the full-length mirror. He had bought Abigail a dress. A grown up and deep red thing that bought out the red flecks in his own suit. People would be looking and noticing her. A daughter. And omega daughter visible to all. She wanted to be seen.

‘How is he?’ Hannibal asked casually, knowing that Abigail couldn’t resist the chance to talk about it.

‘A bitch, but he’s like that anyway,’ she said, the sweep of her dark hair up and away from her neck elongated the pale curve. She was almost translucent, as if she spent as little time as possible out in the sun. He didn’t approve of her language, but he didn’t chide her for it either. ‘He’s not happy that you’re sending me tonight.’

‘I don’t imagine he is.’

‘He also said you always have more than one reason for doing anything so I should trust your judgement all the same.’

‘Quite right.’

‘Mason hates omegas.’ She looked at him, the blue flash of her eyes and the confident tilt of her chin turning towards him. ‘Whoever he is.’

‘Mason presses on those that he considers beneath him. Will pushed him to his limits last time.’ He inhaled the scent of her. A little sweeter. She’d soon be asking to go on suppressants, he knew the route she was wanting to go down. ‘Did he have anything else to say?’

‘Only that he thinks I’m wasting my life,’ she looked over at him and smiled. She was trying to both please and play along. For now it amused him, and she would provide useful in time, he was almost certain of it.

‘We shall see.’

Hannibal had a private box where they would enjoy the show. Abigail was tense and taut against him, her eyes darting around, her thin arm slotted into the rook of his elbow. Her confidence seemed at odds with her insecurity. He wasn’t sure whether it was her youth or her psyche that had her in a spin. She was perhaps unused to being stared at.

Hannibal tried to ignore Abigail’s incessant fidgeting through the first half. He closed his eyes to listen. It wasn’t his favourite performance of Rigoletto, but it wasn’t bad enough to

ruin the evening. When the lights came up during the interval, Hannibal sensed a presence over his shoulder. One mouth to his ear informed him that Mason was waiting for him in a private room. Fifteen minutes until the second act. He nodded his head and looked over at Abigail whose blues eyes were wide-eyed and alert.

‘Well, we mustn’t keep him any longer than possible,’ he said, standing and holding his hand out for Abigail. She seemed surprised that he was taking her with him. She deserved to hear what Will had done, and the effects of it.

‘Hannibal Lecter,’ Mason’s nasal voice carried loudly, even as the door was closed behind them. Hannibal’s personal guard stood at the door, Abigail close beside Hannibal as they came before Mason. He was holding a glass champagne and sipping it distastefully. He was a man of particular taste. Very little appealed to him.

‘Such a pity about Cordell,’ Hannibal said lightly, scanning the man to the right of Mason. Not Cordell. His replacement was fifteen years younger and stocky with muscle. Alpha. He’d be hard to take on in a fight. Cordell had been a talker, which had ultimately been his downfall. ‘My regards to the family. I presume it was a closed casket.’

‘I see you traded the bitch up,’ Verger said, eyes on Abigail. Mainly on her tight red dress, her bare shoulders and slender neck. ‘A younger model. Looks better in a dress, I’m sure.’

‘Will is resting up. He earned it after his performance last night.’ Hannibal allowed a lazy smile to fall on his lips, letting the gaps in his comment fall over both Abigail and Mason. It was crude, but to the point. He leaned his hand on Abigail’s shoulder and asked her to fetch them some drinks and meet him back in their box.

‘An honour to meet you, Abigail,’ Mason said as she departed. She looked annoyed at being dismissed, but she knew better than to argue with him and left the room in a flash of red.

‘My surrogate daughter. The Hobbs’ child,’ Hannibal explained, taking a step closer.

‘You’re collecting omegas, Hannibal,’ Mason mused lightly, uninterested. ‘You can keep your money, but you’ll pay for what you did. Consider this a warning.’

One head tilt and an amused expression towards Verger simply had the other’s man’s nostril’s flaring. ‘And what am I being warned about?’

‘Mr Graham will pay for his treatment of me. And you will pay me back what I am owed. You went back on your promise of investing in me. The cost of Cordell’s funeral was bad enough.’ Verger’s voice rose, as if in horror. ‘I want my money, Lecter.’

‘I think dear Cordell paid wonderfully for his treatment of Will. Enough for us to call a truce, surely? Will’s behaviour was hardly unreasonable considering the evening you had planned for him.’

‘You have to keep the bitches tied up, a lesson Cordell didn’t remember. Do you tie him up? The one in the red dress, do you tie her up as well? Not quite as special, are they? Female omegas. But they do the job *just fine.’*

There was little else to say on the matter. Verger had turned a brilliant red as Hannibal stood there in front of him, not saying a word. He waited until he heard the five minute warning and said goodbye to Mason, who punctuated the closure with verbal threats until the shrill ring of his phone in his pocket distracted him.

'What exactly happened with Mason?' Abigail was full of questions on the way home. Her eyes were burning bright, her cheeks flushed. She seemed high on the experience even if the show had bored her to tears. Perhaps it was the champagne that she had been throwing back a little too hastily.

'Mason wanted money to help front a business venture. I agreed, until I realised that the money was in fact being used to fund a drug trial. When I pulled out of the agreement his men kidnapped Will and tried the drug out on him.' In layman's terms those were the details. Hannibal had seen the guinea pigs for the trial, the betas and omegas pumped full of toxic hormones until he'd hit jackpot with the cocktail. Hannibal had always considered the pharmaceutical trade to be beneath his business model. He particularly didn't like the idea of being duped by someone such as Verger.

'And Cordell? Why did Will kill him?'

'He was Verger's employee. A limpid beta. He got handsy with Will and Will got violent in response.'

'Handsy?'

'Will does not take keenly to being touched. I'm sure you're aware.'

'But why Will and not you?' The questions were good. Hannibal smiled at her until her confidence grew. Her thin legs crossed in the back of the car; one knee hooked over the other.

'Will had caught Mason's attention on a separate occasion. He wanted to mate with him to get back at me and further the Verger bloodline. Will did not take kindly to his supposed role and Cordell paid the price.'

'Sounds like he deserved it,' she said. Her eyes suddenly lost the light, the adrenaline turning to something more akin to exhaustion. She was satisfied with his answers, and he was well aware that she had spent most of the day snooping – between Will and himself. He gave her a tight smile and a gentle squeeze of the shoulder, before he turned his gaze outwards, to look at his city glowing in the night.

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No one said a damn thing when Will was back in his office a day later. His heat hadn't come to a head. He had napped after Abigail had left him, the pre-heat prickling at his skull. He'd fed the dogs and kept them downstairs with food and water. He stayed upstairs in his bedroom, in the bed that he refused to turn into a nest. One blanket over the comforter, a pillow for each side of the double bed. Restrained.

But he hadn't awoken with the usual brain-melting hunger for something, for someone, for an alpha. He'd woken up with a headache from all the sugar; a cramping stomach and a clearer mind than what he'd begun the day with.

The rest of the day he had spent relieved. Heats were an annoying fact of life, one that he had to suffer through in order to remain off suppressants. Worth it to have his mind his own, but he was grateful. Grateful to be able to feed himself, to take his dogs out for a walk, wrapped up warm with the ice wind biting his cheeks. Pleased to be able to go to bed in the same sheets he'd started the day in.

The anxiety came the next day. When he realised that he had been regular ever since his heats had first started. The last time they had been cut short had been when Hannibal had weaned him off the suppressants. He'd been feverish. Hospitalised from withdrawal. He'd come out the other side a new man.

He pushed the thought to the back of his mind once he was at work. He liked the routine of working in the club. He didn't understand jazz and he didn't like the oozing of bodies that swam through the club every night, but he liked it during the day in his cool office. He liked watching from the balcony as the staff worked, prepping for another night. It took his mind away from everything else.

Now he felt nausea pricking at his insides, a churning in the pit of his stomach when he had barely eaten a thing. Matthew had been lurking down at the bar, eyes fixed on Will when he'd seen him walk across the balcony to the office. Now he sat behind his desk, with the door firmly closed and tried to orient himself. He hadn't spoken to Hannibal, but it would get back to him that Will was at work. Matthew would make sure of that.

One week later and Will sat in a clinical waiting room, waiting for his name to be called. He couldn't stop the twitching of his knees, not even when he laid his own damp palms over them. Not even when he tried to breathe through the panic. Hannibal had access to the best doctors, ones that had stitched Will up on occasion, but this was different. Those doctors were owned by Hannibal. He couldn't risk a tattletale. Hannibal at the very least respected that Will needed to keep things separate. They were not bonded and therefore Will was within his rights to seek medical advice on his accord.

There was a ping from the electronic role call in the waiting room and he watched is name light up the screen. He read the room number and stood to his feet; fingers bunched in his pockets, nails catching to the palm. He was in his glasses, his expensive suits left at home. Armour adjusted for the scenario ahead of him.

The doctor was a pretty if plain beta woman with the tone of voice that was neither friendly or hostile. Clipped. She had him taking his jacket off, wrapping the blood pressure band over his bicep before he'd had a chance to even think about what he was trying to say.

'I had an aborted heat,' he said. He'd have to work with half-truths with her. 'Preheat was as normal. Thought I'd wake up in the throes of it, but I just woke up with a headache and clarity.'

‘Has this happened before?’ Will didn’t respond to that and just shrugged before she prompted him again.

‘I wouldn’t be here otherwise, doctor,’ he said. He saw the tightness of her expression and relented, rubbing at his eyes behind his glasses. ‘I’m regular to the hour normally.’

‘Unbonded.’

‘My notes don’t need updating in that regard.’ She was trying to pry the lid open to see the darkness underneath, but he bit his tongue. This is why he *hated* doctors.

‘But you are sexually active.’

‘Where are you going with this, doctor?’ He asked instead, watching the tightness of the blood pressure band around his bicep. It needed reading twice, but it was high. He was omega. Their blood pressure ran high and his life wasn’t without stress. He could feel his pulse throbbing in his temple, his stomach starting to cripple with anxiety. She took blood from him, and he looked down as the vial filled.

‘I’ve read through your notes, Mr Graham.’ He watched her move around the room, back towards him as she tested his blood. He let her words wash over him, assessing them before he realised what she was implying.

‘Is that a threat?’ Will felt his voice clip, saw the way her eyes flicked up. She was beta. Nothing special there. No bias. Alphas were banned, of course, from specialised clinics dealing in omegas. They hadn’t been when he was a kid, but he blinked the thought away.

‘It is a warning. You have been in this position before and it didn’t end well.’

Aware of the implications as to what it was that she was inferring, he suddenly felt the air become a little thicker: bias apparently existed everywhere. He stared down at her hands when she came back over to him. She was young, unmarried by the nakedness of her fingers. He wondered if she had a family.

‘No. I’m not,’ he insisted before she could even verbalise her thoughts. He tried to work on dates but found his mind fogging with the panic of it all. His eyes closed to the bright room, the black of his eyelids calming. ‘We’re careful. More than careful.’

His brain worked through the calculations. The last time it had been unprotected was the night he’d killed Cordell. Before the heat had taken over he had enticed Cordell between his legs, begged for him until the beta was close enough for Will to rip apart with his own teeth. His mouth filled with the red of Cordell’s blood when Hannibal had found him, picking flesh and cartilage from his teeth. They had kissed in the car. It had been in *his* house, on *his* kitchen floor. Forehead to tile. He’d *begged.* He’d slept for three days after. Hannibal had covered for him. Said he was indisposed. They’d cut the camera to make it look like he’d been sitting there in his favoured seat. Planted alibis in the staff. They hadn’t spoken of it since.

‘Oh fuck,’ he said. He usually took emergency contraception when Hannibal knotted. They’d not used condoms in a long time. But he hadn’t thought to at that point. He’d just wanted to ignore the entire humiliating event. ‘Is there a test we should run?’

‘I’ve just run it,’ she said, in a tone that suggested he should have known that. His arm ached slightly from where she had drawn blood. ‘You should bond.’

‘I can’t,’ he said. There was more he could have said, but he decided against it. It wasn’t for her to know.

‘Why can’t you?’ the question was so simple that Will wanted to laugh. It worsened when she leaned over to him, moving to place her hand on him. He squirmed away and jammed his hands between his knees instead. ‘Does he hurt you?’

‘Nope.’ He swallowed. Last night Will had squeezed a metal vice around the dominant hand of the motherfucker who had grassed to the cops about a pick-up point. He’d listened as bones popped and skin split and his heartbeat hadn’t spiked once. The sound of screams pierced his ears. He’d vomited afterward, the nausea that hadn’t left all week had been the thing that had sent him here in the first place. Will tried a lie he’d used previously, at another appointment with another inference that he wasn’t getting any younger. ‘He’s married.’

There was a raise of an eyebrow. Subtle, but Will picked up on it all the same. ‘To another omega?’

‘Sure.’ Will ground his teeth down between his words, the lies falling easily into place. Pity at him, horror at an alpha fattening his knot outside of a bond. Better than the reality. Better than Will playing games and Hannibal playing them right back and them both getting burned in the process. ‘I’m not sure what that has to do with anything.’

‘You have options.’ The doctor looked him up and down. His shabby coat, his hair that he hadn’t bothered to comb. The glasses that didn’t seem quite in place with the rest of him.

‘You sound very sure about that, Doctor,’ he said, pushing his arms into his jacket. He wanted a shower. He wanted to reverse time and forget the symptoms that had driven him here in the first place. The sickness. The aborted heat.

‘I’m going to have to refer you for a psych evaluation. It’s compulsory in this State for unbonded omegas in your situation.’

‘My situation.’

‘Congratulations, Mr Graham,’ she said, voice rather flat as she explained she was writing a script for pre-natal vitamins and iron tablets. ‘You’re pregnant. I’m sending through a referral to a psychiatrist. They’ll be able to help you through the process.’

Will sat uneasy in the chair. He felt heavy with despair, swallowing it down thickly and trying to block out the worst of his predicament. ‘What process would that be?’

‘The one where you discuss your options.’ As he sat back down she talked him through it. Will wasn’t mated, wasn’t even in a relationship. Male omegas needed guidance if they were alone. ‘It’s required by the State. Every unmated omega goes through the same process. By law you are required and granted a psychiatrist. It’s just to offer you stability.’

‘Run the test again,’ he said, swallowing down the indignity at her comment. ‘Run the test again so I can be sure.’

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the kind comments and kudos :)

The first time Hannibal met Will Graham was the morning after an unfortunate police raid on the club. A drug bust. Hannibal expected drug use from customers, but he had not signed off on any agreement that suggested the club was to be used as a trade or pick-up point. That the current manager, when not snorting lines of cocaine up his own nose, was selling it through the club had left Hannibal furious. Carl's standards were slipping and so was the reputation of the club. Their inhouse pianist had left for a better fit elsewhere; the singer's voice was starting to fade with alcohol.

Having the police sniff around his businesses was nothing new, but Carl had been caught in the act, arrested in front of everyone and now Hannibal had been left to deal with the fall out. Carl was out of a job. He would be lucky to leave the city unharmed.

Hannibal had been sitting calmly in the office when two police officers came in to take his statement the next day. One was tall, gruff and in plain clothes, the other smaller and uniformed. He carried the faint but bitter scent of suppressants. So they sent an omega. Hannibal's lips curled.

He'd been dutiful, answered their questions in detail. Watched the omega take notes, his eyes blinking slow. Sluggish. Senses dulled. He hadn't noticed that his gun had been emptied of bullets, presumably a handful of churlish betas at the precinct who were unhappy about an omega in their ranks. Hannibal had noticed. There was an intriguing air about him that Hannibal liked, the way he looked darkly toward his partner with an unbridled fury when his questioning was cut off time and time again.

The officers walked around the club; the omega taking notes, the other one – beta, talking to staff who were well clued up on the art of giving nothing away. Hannibal assessed the omega; watched him bump into tables, watched his slow reaction to a joke his partner made at his expense.

'Graham, is it?' Hannibal leaned forward, pulling on the man's arm when he brushed past where Hannibal had been standing in the doorway watching. He was tugged close, unaffected by an alpha when so heavily drugged. Hannibal's lips pressed a breath away from the shell of his ear, even as he squirmed under the grip. 'Check your gun. I would suggest adjusting your dose.'

'That would be down to the Dynamics Department.' He licked his lips and stepped away, his hands moving to the gun clipped to his hip. It was only as he pulled it apart that he realised

the magazine had been emptied.

'Graham, finish up,' his partner called from below the balcony. Hannibal watched the slow realisation and fury gather on Graham's face, settling into the fine features before he blinked and stepped away from Hannibal.

Hannibal did not consider fate to be an idea particularly worthy his time, but he was pleased when five weeks later he walked, quite casually, into the path of Will Graham again. The officer was crumpled on the ground on a quiet side street, a block from the club. His face pasty, his right hand clutching his left bicep. Blood was seeping from the wound, trickling down between his fingers. His eyes were glazed, almost to the point of passing out, but a notch of familiarity creased between his eyebrows when he noticed Hannibal crouching in front of him.

'Officer Graham, what on earth have you gotten yourself into?'

'Bastard stabbed me.'

Hannibal had him seen by his own personal doctor. A man who worked out of hours and incredibly discretely. Hannibal thought it was best to keep things unofficial. Graham was an officer of the law who had not been reported missing. The pain had almost knocked him out, but the wound wasn't too deep. As the young man was stitched back together, Hannibal sequestered the security footage from the street and had watched Will's partner disappear as they pursued their suspect on foot. Graham, panicked and alone, had fumbled the capture, landing himself a boot to the side of the temple and a knife jammed into his bicep.

'He fucking left me there,' were the first words out of Graham's mouth when he came around, just as aware of his predicament as Hannibal was. He was quite still, even if his eyes remained wary as Hannibal sat close to his hospital bed. 'Where the fuck am I?'

'Your language is crude when drowsy,' Hannibal warned him, warming his mouth with a smile, even as the young police officer gritted his teeth and look down at his own arm. Beneath the bandage laid a well-stitched line. It would scar. 'I had an associate, a doctor I know, fix you up out of hours. He performed pro-bono, Mr Graham. No need to worry about that.'

'It's just Will. Now I'm starting to feel like I owe you.' Hannibal watched the internal workings of Will's mind trying to understand the motives behind his actions; a man he had met on only one occasion before, who had done nothing but warn him of the distrust his colleagues had in him. 'I want to slit his fucking throat for doing this to me.'

For a moment Hannibal regarded whether Will was talking of the suspect that had stabbed him, or his partner who had allowed it to happen.

'Omegas are not solitary creatures by nature,' Hannibal said eventually. 'Suppressant free, you'd find yourself in a much calmer state in my company.'

'I can't work out if you're hitting on me or warning me,' Will said, and then looked away in drowsy-fuelled thought. 'I'm going to talk to Dynamics about adjusting my dose. I can't be

this doped up on the job.'

'Yes. That would perhaps be an idea.' Hannibal smiled, watching as exhaustion slid over his features. He stayed until Will closed his eyes and fell asleep. By morning, the young man had gone, back to his job, back to sort out the issue for himself.

Two weeks later and Will Graham was back at his door, lip bloody and knuckles raw. An altercation with his boss regarding Will's report into his stabbing had left him suspended pending an investigation. An omega on the team was bad enough, a feral one was more than an embarrassment. One that had decided to come off his suppressants without consent was beyond reproach.

'I quit. I thought I could make a difference.' His hands were balled into fists, his eyes down at the ground and refusing to linger on Hannibal's face. It wasn't deference, Hannibal understood that, but perhaps a fear of the mirrored reflection he'd see.

'Did you threaten to slit his throat?'

'Only after he threatened to fuck me in the ass.' Will flexed his bloody knuckles and grimaced. His scent was softer without the bitterness of the suppressants and Hannibal allowed himself the chance to breathe in the perfumed air. 'I kept seeing the way you looked at me when we interviewed you and then you helped me after I was stabbed. You opened my eyes, but I think I knew deep down. I must have known. You watched me. I felt you watching me. I don't feel anything normally. So I stopped taking the suppressants and now I feel everything.'

'The clearest minds are found in those that know themselves fully.'

Will Graham's head lifted from his hands. He was young, eager and angry. If he was alpha, he'd fit quite well into the pack of guards that Hannibal encircled himself with. That he was omega made him all the more interesting. 'What do you mean by that?'

'There is something to be said about the clarity you are currently experiencing. Though I imagine without the suppressants there are a few side effects.' Will was perhaps already too worked up to flush and he gave Hannibal a sideways glance.

'Yeah, there's been a few.' The comment pickled at the corners of Hannibal's mouth. Will went away again, nervous perhaps, of the implication of living a life-suppressant free. Hannibal imagined his insurance was poor. No decent job to go back to. He'd handed over his business card, smiling when Will had crumpled it up and shoved it into his pocket.

Barely a month after that and Will had called through on a static line asking for a meeting. Hannibal decided on a hotel. Mutual ground. He owned the suite and it offered them privacy. Will walked through the room with open hesitation, clutching the whiskey Hannibal had offered him in his hand. He held it close to his chest, back against the wall in open defence. His scent was dulled compared to last time, though his eyes still looked clearer. Back on at least some suppressants.

‘Why would you want to help me?’ he asked eventually. ‘I know who you are. I know you’re not clean. You run this city. Everyone knows it. You own the people that run the city if nothing else.’

‘And yet in the first instance of upset, you yourself, an officer of the law, came to me with bloody knuckles asking for help.’

‘I didn’t ask for help I just—’ Will’s words started to stutter until he calmed himself with a warming gulp of alcohol. Hannibal watched the bob of his throat as he swallowed, how his hair dropped down over his forehead as he ducked his head. He was aesthetically pleasing beneath the crumpled mess. ‘You warned me. I thought there were people at work that had my back, but I was wrong. You took me to the hospital when you could have just left me.’

‘Indeed.’

‘So you obviously want something from me and I think I know what it is and I just—’ Another lick of his lips, another sip of his drink. His cheeks were flushed. ‘Sounds like you just want to fuck me. Want me pliant and fuckable.’

‘I’d argue that pliancy came easier to you on suppressants than now with a clearer mind.’ Hannibal sat back in his chair, rigid. No one would bother them here. Will wasn’t fearful of him, but he had a dubious look on his face. 'Do you have trouble with sex?'

‘Well I don’t seek it out often.’ A sudden smile on his face, crinkling his delicate features as he rubbed his jaw. ‘But alphas. I can…my body reacts like a fucking moth to the flame. If we’re both unmated it’s like lock and key, you know? desperate for it even when I don’t want it. When my boss, when he said--’ Will waved his hand in the air, reminding Hannibal of the threat his boss had made prior to Will’s threat of cutting his throat. ‘Part of me wanted it, but I didn’t. I really didn’t.’

‘An uncomfortable predicament. Chemistry and biology and the role our minds play within it all.’

‘So that is what you want from me.’

‘I think you should remember that on these past two occasions you have been the one to seek me out. You are the one asking for help. I imagine you think payment will be in exchange for your body.’

‘I’d rather be paid in a way that puts money in the bank.’

‘That is my preferred form of currency.’ Really sex hadn’t been on Hannibal’s mind at all. Sex was a necessity, a physical release. Hannibal had gone without it before, and he could go without it again, but there was a spark of something in Will, something that lurked in the shadows of his face, that excited him. It was the reason Hannibal had been so willing to help. ‘But if you were to work for me you would be in the company of alphas. Many unmated.’

‘I’m not screwing them for payment either,’ Will said, masking his face with his hand briefly. Hannibal tried to engage eye contact, but Will kept his eyes down. It felt more akin to

avoidance than subjugation. 'And I'm still taking suppressants. Sort of. Just enough to stop me falling apart.'

'I wouldn't have you fall apart, but I would have you off them completely.' His scent was too exhilarating to be masked completely, and Hannibal thought he suited the rawness of an unclouded mind better. 'I would pay you what I pay others in similar positions. I'm still looking to replace the management at the club.'

Something like relief dawned on Will's face and his body softened against the wall. Then the laughter came, slow but unconsciously. 'I don't know how to run a club. I'm not sure I was even a very good cop.'

'You can be taught. I think you can be taught a great deal many things.' Hannibal kept his voice light, just vague enough that Will tilted his head like a pet, but he said nothing else, sipping his liquor cautiously.

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Will spent early Sunday sorting through his new medication. He emptied his half-finished bottle of aspirin, pouring them into an empty jar before he decanted his new prenatal vitamins into it. He did the same with a second bottle and his new iron tablets. He was prone to headaches; he was known for carrying a bottle of aspirin around.

Sundays were the only days that Will really had to himself. Hannibal was old school enough to not work, and seldom called upon Will's services. Will always spent it in his solitary house, fishing if he had a chance and the weather was good. Watching his dogs tear around the land. There was no expectation on him, just his thoughts rattling around his brain. Today his eyes kept drawing to the kitchen floor. Where this *thing* had been conceived. *Jesus Christ*. Getting knocked up by his boss on his own kitchen floor. He hadn't remembered much. Just the cooling sensation of tile against his forehead, the familiar hands on the insides of his thighs, over his head. His body parting for Hannibal as it had so many times before, but different because never had it soothed that ache inside him in that way, fake or otherwise.

No one knew his address aside from Hannibal, who was respectful enough to steer clear, or Abigail, who thankfully hadn't shown up again since her one visit out here. Will sat on his porch drinking a weak tea, wrapped up to stop the cold getting to his bones. He watched the Prius come rolling down his lane, slowing over the ice thickened mud. The therapist he had been assigned was coming over. He'd refused to see them in their office.

He was expecting Dr Chilton. At least that's what the paperwork said. Another beta. Will would probably hate him. He couldn't remember the last time he'd enjoyed the company of someone with a medical licence. But it wasn't Chilton who stepped out of the Prius, but the same woman who'd chased after Abigail that time Will had picked her up. Dr Bloom. Long dark hair, a bright blue coat that seemed stark against the barren winter that surrounded his little house in the woods. He stood up to greet her as the dogs heralded her in excitement. They weren't used to visitors.

'We've met before,' she said as she fought through the barrier of dogs and scanned his face. She held her hand out and it took him five full seconds before he brought himself to shake it,

waiting until she recalled his face. ‘Abigail’s driver.’

‘Not really,’ he said, whistling for his dogs to calm down. ‘You’re not Dr Chilton.’

‘No, and you should be thankful for that.’ A wry twist of a smile. ‘Frederick was double-booked and asked me to take his place. By double-booked I mean an especially important golf event he couldn’t miss. I’m Alana Bloom.’

‘Right.’ Will felt himself frowning as he invited her inside. This made it feel more real, inviting a stranger into his house. He made her a coffee, aware of how her eyes scanned the house. Assessing it, assessing him. He kept it tidy; dog beds and fishing gear, chairs rather than a sofa, but not much else. He didn’t entertain. His eyes drifted to the kitchen tiles as she took a seat at the dining room table, her hands fixed around her mug.

‘I thought you worked at the college,’ he said, finishing the dregs of his tea. He fidgeted with the mug, scraped his fingers beneath his jaw, and tapped his foot to the floor. Anything to distract himself from his current situation. ‘That’s how Abigail knows you.’

‘I work with omegas that need support. I’m not based at the college; Abigail’s one of only two clients I see there.’ Dr Bloom gave him a smile that he imagined was supposed to be soothing. He didn’t find it that way. He just felt sick.

‘This is confidential? You can’t tell Abigail that you’re seeing me, right?’ he asked. He wasn’t sure what he would tell Abigail, how he would tell her. It was bad enough that she’d managed to get so much out of him about Hannibal. God, he wished he’d kept his goddamn mouth shut but she had caught him at a difficult time. She had caught him completely.

‘The only person I could share anything with would be your bondmate.’

‘I don’t have one of those,’ Will said, grateful that he had never slipped down that path. ‘If an alpha had a therapist you wouldn’t be obliged to tell their omega, would you?’

‘No, I wouldn’t.’ Her voice was serious, compassionate. It made the pity harder to swallow.

‘Still, we got it better than some places,’ Will said. There was a variety of reasons why he would never step foot in Louisiana again, and half of it was to do with the treatment of his status. Maryland was alright, really, in comparison.

‘Have you thought about your options?’ Dr Bloom dutifully changed the subject and didn’t wrap it up in anything else. She leant over and pulled some paperwork from her handbag, spreading it out on the table in front of her. It looked like a checklist. He eyed it with uncertainty. That’s what the meeting was about. To *discuss his options.*

He rubbed at his head, hoping his voice wasn’t shaking too much. ‘How strict is this eval? Do I have a say? Is there much point in it if you’re going to sign off on a termination?’

Her eyebrows raised, fingers curling around her steaming mug. Her eyes were studying his house again, counting the dogs silently.

‘Is that what you’re hoping for?’ she asked. ‘I read your notes, Mr Graham.’

‘It’s Will.’

‘Fine. Then call me Alana.’ Her eyes met his firmly over the table. ‘Shall we go through your options?’

‘I don’t plan on a termination,’ he said. His eyes dropped down and instead focused down on his empty mug. At his feet, the fan of a dog’s tail brushed over the top of his foot.

‘Adoption, then?’ he tried to stop the flinching of his fingers around his mug, but she caught his reaction. Before her mouth could open, he took a chance to speak.

‘That’s—no.’ Will shook his head and hated how it must have looked to her. Made him looked weak; pathetic.

‘So you’re wanting to keep it.’ He wasn’t sure he’d consider it a *want* but rather a decision he spent all night deliberating on and decided was the best option.

‘I just figured I tried really hard to not end up in this situation that it feels like fate to end up here.’

‘Are you a man that believes in fate?’ she asked. He walked over to the sink when he couldn’t sit still any longer and rinsed his mug out, filling it up with water instead. The wetness against his lips cooled the heat inside slightly.

‘I wasn’t.’ He took a seat beside her. ‘Now I’m not so sure.’

Alana sat with him for over an hour. They filled the evaluation in together, or she asked questions and he gave clipped answers and divulged no more than he was willing to. He had a job. He had savings and a home. He had a lenient boss. He had insurance; his mortgage was always paid.

‘Is the alpha likely to claim the child?’ she asked, as they reached the third and final page. It felt like he had been talking for an hour, even if it was in staccato one-word responses.

‘Without a doubt,’ he said, thinking to Hannibal. Hannibal was possessive of Will. It was a feeling Will only allowed himself to enjoy when he was feeling particularly vulnerable. Otherwise he felt a little trapped. To give him a child would stand in the way of that. Maybe Hannibal would love it, but he might also hate it for how it took Will’s attention away. They didn’t talk of children, certainly not of having any together.

‘You will have to tell him soon.’ A warning more than anything else. He was hitting eight weeks; one month left of the first trimester. Her eyes moved over his body.

‘Not necessarily. Last time… I carried small. And it’s mine not his. He hasn’t got a claim on me, so he hasn’t got a claim on the kid. I’ve got another four months until the scent comes through.’ An alpha teacher had found out the last time and reported it to his clueless beta father when he’d noticed the change in Will’s scent. Will stepped away from the memory when it tried to envelope him.

‘You told the previous doctor he was married. Is that true, Will?’ He looked at Alana, at the gloss of her dark hair. The light from the window behind her poured out a yellow halo from crown to shoulder. He looked away and his mind skirted back to Hannibal. An heir to his empire. A prodigal child to warp from birth. Easier to manipulate than even Abigail, who didn’t have a clue how vulnerable she was. Who *wanted to be like Will.* This kid might have a chance at normality. *It might.*

‘Yes,’ he lied again. He rolled a shoulder as if the idea didn’t bother him. ‘I’m not telling you who he is. It doesn’t concern you.’

‘Would I be concerned?’

‘Do you know me well enough to be concerned in the first place?’ He averted his eyes so that he didn’t have to analyse the look she gave him and shoved his hands into his pockets, nails pinching into the palms of his hands. ‘I don’t want to ruin whatever he has going for him. I just want to keep things separate.’

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It was late Monday morning when Will pulled up outside the club and noticed that there was a smart silver Jag parked in the spot beside his. Brand new model. The paintwork glinted in the winter sun like it had been driven straight out of the showroom. As he locked his car he peered inside, the seats were a slick black leather, the stitching exquisite. Nicer than anything else around here, save for Hannibal’s Bentley. He unlocked the backdoor and wandered in, climbing the metal staircase and bumping into Clark Ingram just outside his office.

Ingram was the kind of alpha that lucked out on status alone because he had little going for him otherwise. He did the accounts for the club, and Will had no problem emailing over the numbers each month, it was wholly more enjoyable than standing around in his presence. Will found him neither likable or menacing. He was just a worm of a man that dangled his status above everyone’s heads as if they should drop at the very sight of him.

Ingram was talking loudly at one of the janitors, her head down and disinfectant clutched tightly in her hand. She looked caught and a little scared. Ingram was a mated alpha with a wandering eye. Once he noticed Will, his chest puffed up, knuckles rapping on the wall where he was leaning. The young woman took it as her chance to leave, crossing the balcony at speed and padding down the stairs. Will noticed the silver keyring dangling from Ingram’s fingers. It matched the Jaguar outside.

‘New car,’ Will said, neither as a question or query, rather more a statement.

‘We’re all due a treat now and then.’ His eyes dropped briefly to Will’s mouth before away. ‘I came to pick up the month’s expenditures.’

‘I usually email those through to your office.’ Will opened his office door, pulling his arms out of his coat and sliding it onto the back of his chair. He sat down, feet rolling under the desk as he booted up the computer. Rather than sitting in the chair opposite, Ingram stood over Will. Stomach almost touching Will’s shoulder. Will folded his lips inward to stop himself making a comment. ‘Unless you want physical copies too.’

‘I like to come by every so often.’ He was here to flaunt off his new possession. Will wasn’t fooled in the slightest, but he didn’t let his feelings show either way. He bought up the folder with the month’s invoices and receipts and sent them over to Ingram’s office by email.

He had to twist his head upwards to look Ingram in the face. The tactic was obvious, as was the flaring of nostrils as he openly scented Will. ‘God you smell good. How has no one bent you over this desk and claimed you the right way?’

‘As opposed to the wrong way?’ Will asked, forcing his tongue to behave. He always wore a neutraliser so Ingram wouldn’t have been able to smell a damn thing anyway. His fingers clawed into his knees, hidden beneath the desk. Disrespected in his own fucking office. Instead he asked, ‘Is there anything else I can help you with?’

‘I’ve been meaning to ask is it still the same house band? The wife wants to come. She’s partial to jazz.’

‘Nothing has changed here,’ Will said, refusing to sit taller in his chair even as he itched to stand. There was little height between them otherwise.

Will mulled the conversation with Ingram over. The man had outstayed his welcome. Even as Will got on with his work in the office, he could hear the echoing boom of Ingram’s voice as he blustered at the staff preparing for another night. They mostly tried to ignore him. Will didn’t get involved. It was always awkward when he did. He managed the place, but Ingram was Hannibal’s employee just as Will was, and he was alpha. Made things complicated. Made the lines of Will’s authority blurred.

Later, when Ingram had noisily pulled away in his Jaguar, Will dialled Hannibal’s phone. As he answered Will could hear traffic in the background. He pictured Hannibal in the back of one of the black armoured cars, being driven somewhere important. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine himself beside Hannibal. Their fingers meeting in the middle, curling and locking, hidden from view of the driver by the separation. He only flushed a little at the romance of it all. It would be nice in another life.

‘Does Ingram work any of your other accounts?’ he asked the question, drawing himself out of the daydream.

‘Ingram?’ Hannibal spoke as if he had to find the name buried in his head, as if his memory wasn’t better than Will’s when it came to remembering people and places and everything in between. Will rolled in the chair, smiling at the pettiness. ‘His company takes care of the restaurant too. Why do you enquire?’

‘No reason.’ Will didn’t want to push the issue so soon. It could be nothing. ‘He showed up here. New car.’

‘As nice as the Bentley?’ there was a genuine stab of concern. Will unfurled it easily beneath the haughty tone. Couldn’t be outdone by another alpha, not one that worked for him. It was in those moments that Will found Hannibal at his most human, succumbing to a moment of status-borne envy.

Will laughed the comment away, all the same. ‘Not quite.’

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‘Are you concerned about your last heat?’ Hannibal asked. For a second Will’s spine became rigid against his chest. The dark brush of curls resting against his jawline shifted. Will was propped up against Hannibal’s chest, sitting tight into the apex of his legs. The sheets covered their lower halves and he had one arm tucked over Will’s waist, pressing him back, the other rested on his shoulder, squeezing gently at the light knots.

‘I saw a doctor. It’s fine,’ Will said slowly. His voice was hazy and caught up in the feeling of Hannibal’s mouth; the kisses placed beside the fingers resting at the nape of his neck. Hannibal didn’t bite, but grazed the taut skin of his nape, tasting the gentle scent. ‘Just my cycle getting back on track after Verger. It fucked with my hormones.’

Hannibal thought back to that night; Will drenched in blood, hands rough and shaking. How he had moaned out a sob, how his fingers had clawed into the tiled floor until his nails split. How wet he had been; how much he had begged for it. How Hannibal had felt his own mind shut down as his biology took over. How he kept just enough back to not sink his teeth into flesh and claim Will.

‘I’m thinking of putting Abigail to work in the gallery,’ he said, changing the subject. Will’s head twisted up, a hand on Hannibal’s thigh to steady himself. The brush of warm breath against his jaw as Will focused on him.

‘Why did you take her to the opera then?’

‘I wanted to gage Mason’s reaction to another omega in my circle.’ Will’s body tensed in front of him, but Hannibal ignored it, petting him because he could, because it soothed his basic need to protect. ‘He was uninterested. All comments led back to you.’

‘Someone leaked my movements to him that night.’ Will leaned over to grab the whiskey resting on the side, the ice had melted in the heat of the room, but Hannibal watched him swirl it as if expecting the gentle clink of ice against glass. ‘So it *was* about me rather than you?’

‘Was that ever in doubt?’ Hannibal kept his face placid and blank as Will eyed him up, his glass held to his lips, one hand spread wide on his chest, his eyes bright and blue. He took a sip of his drink before answering.

‘He could find any omega. He could pluck one from the street. He wanted to have me for the power it would have over you. It’s a power play. It’s about taking something from you.’

‘But they’re not all like you, are they, Will?’ Hannibal fixed his hand around Will’s, so that both their hands were curled over the glass. He stared as Will’s forehead creased into a frown and wondered what it would be like to see the depths of rage beneath it all.

‘He wanted to fuck me because he thinks you own me.’

‘He didn’t want to fuck you.’

‘He spiked me with a heat-inducer,’ Will reminded him, as if Hannibal had forgotten the night. How self-restraint had met a bitter end as Hannibal pressed his body down onto Will’s. Will’s hands wedged between cool tile and Hannibal’s larger hands.

‘He wanted to breed you.’

‘He could breed anyone he wanted.’ Will’s tone was dark, but Hannibal could tell in the flat response that Will had known exactly why he had been picked.

‘I imagine a child of yours would be a viable weapon. Violent. Temperamental. Beautiful.’ He lifted a finger, just the one, to gently push Will’s hair back. ‘If he forced a bond on you, you’d be his weapon to command. If he’s playing around with heat-inducers then you were the perfect one to experiment with.’

‘You think mine and Verger’s kid would be beautiful?’ The bitterness of Will’s tone couldn’t hide the idea that he was seeking out a compliment just to twist it around. Hannibal admired the manipulation immensely.

‘Beautifully destructive.’

Will laughed a dry thing, body jolting. ‘I pity anyone that makes a father out of Mason Verger.’

There was silence for a time. Will softened against him again and didn’t fight when Hannibal lifted a hand to press against his forehead, pushing his head to rest more firmly in the crook of Hannibal’s collarbone. Hannibal wrapped his other hand over his chest, holding him close. The room smelled of sex, a little of alcohol, and their two scents mingling. Will was lax against him, soft in private when there was a wiry anger about him in front of others. Hannibal rested his cheek to the curve of Will’s bared throat, willing soothe away any tension.

‘I never thanked you,’ Will said slowly. The vibrations of his vocal cords tingled against Hannibal’s cheek. ‘For how you helped me that night.’

‘I’ve never seen you in heat before.’ Hannibal waited for Will to continue the conversation. As much as he enjoyed coaxing conversation from Will, there would always be some things best left unspoken. He presumed their shared experience of Will’s heat was one of them.

‘It was different,’ Will said, still resting against Hannibal. His heartbeat was slow and steady, even when Hannibal pressed his lips to his throat. Whether it was being held or soothed, or just a feeling of ultimate comfort, Hannibal had to hold back the side of him that wanted to pull him apart to see. ‘It was like the lucid me was still there. Like a fight between being nullified and present.’

‘It’s how you fought him off.’

‘I like to think even in heat I’d have done that.’ Hannibal adjusted his hand across Will’s chest, over his firm stomach as he gripped his waist. For a moment Will tensed, softening with the drag of sharp teeth over his shoulder. ‘Thank you for not biting me.’

‘A fake heat is no way to cement a bond,’ Hannibal said, allowing the fantasy briefly as his fingers skirted over the length of Will’s forearms. Will under his thumb, submitting through his forced obedience to his bonded alpha. Deferential. There would be little fun in that. This game they played now, the tease of their bodies, their secondary sexes catching and entwining without the permanency of a bond was far more exhilarating. Will wasn’t born to be caged any more than Hannibal.

‘Thank you for not letting anyone else see me that way,’ Will started to say, and Hannibal loosened his grip around him. Will smelled delicious. Warm, his own scent, of Hannibal’s semen, of alcohol. ‘I’ll find out who did it, who told Verger where to find me. I won’t let it go. You have someone rotting on the inside.’

‘Will you kill them?’ Hannibal asked, accepting the soft kiss to the corner of his mouth as Will finally left the warmth of the bed. Hannibal pulled the sheets up around his waist and watched the stretch of skin as Will bent forward, pulling on underwear, pants, his shirt. Layer by layer his clothes covered up skin that only Hannibal got to see exposed. The intimacy of it all stirred something up inside.

‘Yeah, I’ll kill ‘em.’ The tense muscle in Will’s jaw twitched, but then he turned and sat down on the bed, leaning in. ‘You’ll let me, won’t you?’

‘It’s yours.’ Will bent forward. A deep kiss to Hannibal’s mouth, and then the sensation of Will tucking his nose to his neck and inhaling deep brought something warm to Hannibal’s chest. Enough that he wanted to rest his hands over his sternum and feel the sensation from the outside.

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Abigail wasn’t sulking. She wasn’t five. But she also wasn’t talking to Hannibal. Hannibal, who saw potential in her, who insisted that he was pleased with how she had responded, with how she had played all those alphas at their own game. Yet instead of letting her into his world like she understood, he was giving her a position at the art gallery he owned. As an *office assistant.*

‘Can’t you talk to him?’ Abigail sat on the edge of Will’s desk at the club, kicking her heels against the wooden base. She wanted to throw something. To scream. Instead she complained at Will, who she knew was barely listening. She felt enwombed in the safety of the office; Will’s gentle scent had always been calming, and the soft thudding of the live band through the walls added to the sensation.

‘Why would I do that?’

‘Because I don’t want to work in the art gallery. I want to be like you, I thought I could, you know, work with you.’

‘You’re underaged and this is nightclub.’ Will looked a little peaky, but she didn’t say anything. She focused on how the beat of the drums pulsated through the walls, the echoing thrums of laughter from the crowd on the floor below that carried up high. ‘You shouldn’t even be here now.’

‘That wasn’t what I meant.’

‘I know exactly what you meant and the answer is no. Apologise to the college and get a fucking real job.’ She watched as he unscrewed the lid to his aspirin and swallowed one down dry, wincing as it stuck to the back of his throat.

‘Do you never go out there and have some fun?’ she asked, nodding her head to the closed door. Better to change the topic than go in circles. He’d only kick her out for real.

‘Jazz isn’t my idea of fun. Or people. Or clubs,’ he said, and then sat back in his chair, face turned upward towards the ceiling. ‘I don’t know how I ended up here. I just did.’

‘Does Hannibal like jazz?’

‘I don’t know,’ Will said, tilting his head to her question like he had to think about it. ‘He probably likes it more than either of us.’

‘But what am I supposed to do?’

‘Stay out of trouble, I imagine,’ he said. He rubbed a hand over his face and half covered a yawn. ‘I bet he pays good money.’

‘To be a secretary?’ she crossed her arms and tried to puff the frustration out with her exhale. She heard him laugh. It was true that he had agreed to pay her a lot more than what she knew the going rate for an office job normally was.

‘Look Abigail. I’m not letting you into that part of my life, but that doesn’t mean that Hannibal won’t let you into his world from time to time. You just have to be patient.’

‘I don’t want to get into the situation you did. I want to be prepared.’ She looked away when his eyes narrowed at her. It was almost embarrassing thinking of Will in such a vulnerable situation. She didn’t like to picture him like that. ‘I know that Verger’s man tried to rape you.’

‘He didn’t *try.* Neither of them stood a chance against me. I convinced Cordell that I was too far gone in my heat and that I needed him. Got him close enough so that I could get him away for good. There’s a difference between that and what you’re implying.’

‘But they wanted to.’

‘Yeah.’ Abigail listened as the song came to an end and the bass changed, deepening into something sadder. She looked over at Will, at where the shadows had pocketed down beneath the sockets of his eyes. ‘Have you seen Dr Bloom recently?’

She stared at him for a moment before she realised what he had said. She blinked and then caught herself frowning. ‘No. I only saw her when I was on campus. Why?’

‘No reason. She seemed to care about you. She chased after you.’ There was a tiny change on his face, where his mouth opened before it closed and he rubbed a hand over his face, hiding it. ‘She would probably be able to help you more than I can.’

‘Dr Bloom as the bad habit of seeing the best in anyone, whether they deserve it or not,’ she said, thinking back to every meeting with Alana. Nice enough, but too obvious. ‘She related everything back to my dead father. Is your dad dead?’

‘Yeah,’ Will said. ‘We weren’t close.’

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‘I’ll be a terrible parent,’ Will told Alana on his first official meeting with her after the evaluation was signed off. Next week he had a scan. He’d have to make sure that no one followed him, couldn’t have anyone finding out just yet, not until he worked out how he wanted it to go. For now he walked the flat plains outside his house, his psychiatrist beside him as the dogs rushed ahead.

‘What makes you say that?’

‘I don’t know what family is.’ He only really thought about it on important days. Father’s Day. His dead dad’s birthday. Thanksgiving and Christmas. When people spoke of their mothers, it mostly left him feeling hollow.

‘Family doesn’t have to mean blood. I think you consider Abigail a daughter.’

‘She’s so desperate for a parental figure. I’m the closest she had to that. She doesn’t have anyone else. I know what that’s like.’ Abigail had gone through a phase when she was sixteen, kept running away from boarding school. Will would find her, take her to the movies, buy a pizza and see her almost-happy again before he drove her back to the school. It’d gone on for almost six months. She’d just needed someone to spend time with her, to tell her off, or listen to her like they cared.

‘Do you think Abigail will be excited about you having a child?’

‘I feel like I’m going to blow up everyone’s lives. I should just get rid of it. I know I should. It would be easier.’

‘This must be bringing up difficult memories for you.’ He knew it was coming. Had waited for her to broach the subject because he sure as *hell* hadn’t wanted to. Memories swam, raising dutifully before his eyes. Unrepressed to ears that were eager to hear what he had to say.

‘I stole a pregnancy test and took it in the gas station restroom three miles from home. Walked home in a daze. Didn’t tell anyone for months.’ Will could never linger in those past moments too long, it burned. Burned so bright that things became hazy. ‘Only time my dad laid a hand on me was when he found out.’

‘That must have been hard.’

‘He had plans for me.’

‘That wasn’t what I meant.’

‘I know.’ He gave her a tight smile. ‘It’s ancient history. It’s a long time ago now.’

‘Do you think about him?’

‘Are we talking about my father still?’ he asked, aware that she wasn’t.

‘Your son, Will. I was asking about your son.’ She knew it all because she’d read his goddamn notes. The notes that held all of his most stupid experiences over the years. The mistakes he’d made that one summer in that one boatyard they were working in. Everything that came after.

‘I don’t have a son.’ There was a pause where the lie sat between them. It engulfed him for a moment, before he told himself that there was little point lying. She knew everything about him anyway. She wasn’t a friend, so he didn’t have to hide it. ‘I tried when I was nineteen. I tried to get him back, but they wouldn’t let me. Not even when I was in the academy and on my best behaviour. I was good back then and they wouldn’t even tell me his name. So no, I don’t have a son. I’m sure he has a great life. Better than what I could have given him.’

She didn’t respond. Ahead, the dogs started to bark as Buster chased a squirrel up a tree. Will pressed on, ignoring the gentle sound of Alana’s softer steps beside him.

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Will tried his hardest to get out of the *family dinners* Hannibal insisted on. It would be all the men he held in close association. Tier. Brown. His favoured lawyer that Will had spent almost no time with. Abigail was opposite Will. A few others that Will had never bothered to remember the names of. His interaction was limited in part because he made most of them uncomfortable. He didn’t care. It was a relief to be ignored.

Abigail was still sulking about her new job and her sulking had a particularly sour bite to it. She was still a teenager and painfully naïve, so Will only sent her occasional pissy looks and didn’t take it too personally when she kicked him beneath the table. Hannibal remained rigid at the head of the table, her reaction to everything ruining his usual good mood at these dinners. No one else could sense it, but Will was attuned to his emotions, as minuscule as they were.

‘Let me,’ Matthew said, when Will reached over to grab a pitcher of water. He allowed it, was too exhausted to bristle at the way he breathed a little deeper every time he looked toward Will. Sometimes pouring a glass of water was just polite. Will was *fairly sure* of that. It didn’t mean he was being pandered to.

‘Thank you.’ The way Matthew leaned over after, trying to engage Will further, was more of an annoyance. His eyes darted from the marble coolness of Hannibal’s expression, to Abigail’s pouting face as she argued with him about something inane. Everyone else in the room was oblivious, chatting among themselves.

‘…I could come to the club and show you, if you’d like?’ Will blinked, half aware that Matthew was still talking to him. He nodded his head, taking a sip of his water, pretending to follow what he was saying.

‘Yeah, alright,’ he agreed, refusing eye contact. He moved his eyes up to Hannibal again, his cool expression focused on Will.

Afterwards, when the men had gone home and Abigail had driven off in that huge lump of a car Hannibal had gifted her, they retired to Hannibal’s private study. *The perfect time,* Will thought, *to tell Hannibal the truth.* That their time together, that the godawful fake heat that had left him begging on his kitchen floor had also left him pregnant.

Hannibal was coiled up like a spring and brimming with tension. His face remained passive, his eyes alert. He was sitting in his favoured chair, his hands steepled beneath his chin, his wine glass resting on the side-table beside him. Will picked up on his mood; could sense it in how he wanted to touch touch touch Hannibal. Over his clothes, under them. Wanted to tuck his neck to his throat and press their bodies together until Hannibal softened against him. Abigail’s refusal to cooperate had left him furious in a way he didn’t know how to unleash.

‘You always know,’ Hannibal said fondly when Will’s fingers brushed the long length of his shoulder. Will held a glass of wine in his hand, more for show than anything else. He was limiting his alcohol intake as much as he could without drawing attention to the fact. Legally his limit was lower as he was an unmated omega. When he was a cop, he’d been forcibly teetotal. Couldn’t be trusted otherwise.

‘Intuition. Abigail will get over herself. Don’t worry about it.’ Will focused on the now. He placed his wine beside Hannibal’s on the table and rested his weight onto the heavy arm of the chair. He pulled apart the knot of Hannibal’s tie, silk hissing over cotton and sliding between his fingers before it hung loose around his neck. He unbuttoned the first three buttons of Hannibal’s shirt and skated his hand beneath the fabric. Warm fingers against warm skin. Skin on skin, alpha and omega. It was standard intimacy.

He was desperate to open his mouth and confess. Hannibal was the steadiest person he knew. Rarely rocked by anything. He would steady Will, had steadied him in the past. If Will opened his mouth and admitted what they had created things wouldn’t be so bleak. Back when Will was at his most vulnerable, Hannibal hadn’t forced a bond. For all the things that he was, for all the things he had done, he had never taken anything from Will that he hadn’t consented to. He would be rational when Will struggled, would see clear when Will’s eyes started to fog. Will was wild, and Hannibal was deliberate. It *would* be okay because Hannibal would make it okay.

But. Will remembered. It wasn’t just him now. It was a baby and a baby didn’t deserve to get caught up. This baby was only in existence because his relationship with Hannibal had been considered a threat to someone else. And he’d had one taken from him once, when he was young enough that his opinion had been irrelevant. He couldn’t have that happen again. If Hannibal thought a child born between Will and Verger would be violent and temperamental, what would he say about one between them?

‘Your thoughts have you diving deep tonight, Will. Perhaps you will resurface at some point.’

Will blinked back to reality, back stiff from where he was huddled slightly over the chair, his face buried into the warmth of Hannibal's collar, the fingers from one hand still curled beneath the cool rich cotton of his shirt, the other looped around the back of the chair. Hannibal's large hand was on the back of his neck, a soothing sensation he had always enjoyed.

'I'm okay,' Will said, he lifted his head, resting their flushed cheeks together. Beside him he felt Hannibal sigh softly, unspooling from the stiffness. 'I'm alright.'

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I mean...there has to be smut at some point in a/b/o right?

Will knew an accountant. Not one on Hannibal's books, but a man stuffed to the brim with neuroses and not inclined to leave his cluttered apartment. Franklyn had worked with hedge fund investors in another life, back when leaving his apartment seemed a conceivable option.

Franklyn used to come to the club, which is how they met. He liked to stand on the top floor just outside Will's office, plump fingers curled over the wired balcony and look down at the stage from high up. He liked when they delved into easy pleasing classics. Will wasn't a jazz man, he just ran the club, but he liked watched Franklyn's wired and panicked face soften during those songs, liked to watch his skin take on the blue lights of the club, his shoulders roll back and his breath even out as the keys and the horns rolled smoothly over the sound system. Will didn't like very many people, but he did like Franklyn. He was easy, and he expected so very little in return.

He was also the most quintessentially un-alpha alpha Will had ever met. *You seem a little castrated* Will had said when they had been alone together the first time. Franklyn had a smell about him; warmth and rum and sweat, but there a strength missing. Will enjoyed his company, he was soothing in that alpha way, but he didn't send Will's stomach roiling, or his lungs filling with perfumed dread.

'I run a clean business,' Will said, sitting in the armchair across from Franklyn's sofa. His computer software was laid out in the corner, on a dusty desk piled with tissues and take out cartons from the Chinese restaurant below. The greasy smell that wafted up from the open window made Will's stomach churn, but it was the same every time he came. No different now that he was pregnant.

Franklyn was almost as broad as he was short, his round face not helped by the thick brush of a beard coating his soft chin. Whenever he spoke to Will, it was as if he were embarrassed to even be speaking to him, that an omega would give him the time of day. It was nice, on occasion, to feel like he had a little bit of power over someone.

'I would never dispute that.'

'Can you check over some accounts for me? Make sure everything is being filed correctly? I never want to deal with IRS unless I have any reason to.' They also wouldn't directly deal with him, being as he was just an omega. Will didn't need to mention that part.

Franklyn's face flexed with anxiety, harsh lines deepening on his brow. 'Has uh. Has something happened?'

'No. Just a change in our accountant's circumstances and I hope his wealth isn't anything to do with the business. We're steady. We're afloat, but there's not been an influx. Does that make sense?' Will kept his tone light, soft enough to appeal to Franklyn, who was no true alpha, but who would want to protect Will all the same.

'Well, I can only see what's happening on your end of things. I can check your accounts, but I can't show you what happens with the money once it leaves.' He could, Will knew, if he pushed hard enough, but he didn't want to go there if he didn't have to. He wouldn't lose an almost-friend over Ingram.

'It all looks like code to me.' Will had never been good with numbers. He was good with his hands, was good with words, but numbers tended to ache his head more than anything else. 'Can I send it all over for you to check out?'

Franklyn nodded his head, and then fussed around, pulling his sweater from his round stomach as he stood. He poured Will a watery coffee that he couldn't bear to drink and then sat down in his chair, cheeks flushed.

They sat in a companionable silence for a time. Will didn't want to speak. He wanted to sit with his eyes closed, feeling slightly nauseas but surrounded by the pleasant and comforting scent of an alpha that didn't want to fuck him. 'Alphas. They sense things, right? You can feel your bondmate's emotions? You can tell when they're upset? When they're happy?'

'We can cope with physical separation much better than omegas, but we know when something isn't right. Or so I'm told…I've never...' Franklyn waved a dismissive hand as Will's eyes opened enough to see him turning bright red.

'Are you just not interested in a mate?' Will had never really been curious before. They were just two indifferent men struck dumb by their statuses.

Franklyn's face changed. 'Are you asking me to be yours because well… you're great, Will but—'

'No. Jesus, no,' Will laughed, 'I just wondered. It's hard to get answers about these kinds of things. People only seem to tell half-truths, either to me or themselves.'

'It's hard to get answers about *anything* but well… I'll try. I'll see what I can do about your situation.'

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'I thought you'd like it.'

Matthew was standing too close. Will found that most people stood too close to him. Too close that he could feel their body heat radiating, or so that he could smell them. But this felt

beyond that. Matthew usually kept a more respectable distance, but now Will could feel his breath against his face.

‘It’s great.’ He gave a false smile and stepped back. They were in his office with the door closed. Matthew had come to show Will the new gun he had procured. An antique pistol; beautiful but not an easy weapon. It was the thing that Will had agreed to seeing when they were at dinner, although he could hardly remember agreeing to anything. He just remembered Hannibal’s marble face and taut body, how he was desperate to calm him down.

‘We’d work so well together, don’t you think?’ Will had made the unwise decision to perch on the edge of his desk once he had put space between them. Now Matthew stood ahead of him, swallowing up his personal space with eager eyes and a crooked smile.

‘Yeah. Hannibal puts together a good team.’

‘You know that isn’t what I meant.’ Will was silent. Matthew continued, ‘you’re so violent and I’m so violent. We could take on the world. No one would ever think to mess with us.’

‘Bonnie and Clyde?’

‘But better.’ A warm hand on his knee. Will tensed beneath the touch but didn’t move. ‘When you went into heat I could smell you. Even through that locked door. I had imagined it, but it wasn’t even close to how it smelled. Nearly sent me into a rut.’

‘I’m sorry about that.’ Will wasn’t sorry, would never be sorry that his own biology screwed both himself and everyone around him. He wasn’t afraid of Matthew either. Wasn’t sure that he’d win a fight against him, but he wasn’t afraid of him.

‘I know you’re waiting for him, but he won’t do it, you know. He doesn’t understand you like I do. He doesn’t get it.’ There was excitement in Matthew’s voice, but he didn’t crowd Will further, instead he stepped away, circling the desk as Will remained perched. ‘I thought Hannibal was going to claim you when he found you in that room, but I knew I had to have you.’

‘I’m not interested,’ Will said, aware that his words were going unheard. The young man circled the desk erratically, caught up in his own fantasy.

‘I could give you pups. Not right away, but after a year or so. And you wouldn’t want for anything. I’d keep you safe. I understand you.’ Will could sense Matthew’s arousal. He kept his eyes downcast, trying to fill the gaps between Matthew’s words. *I knew I had to have you.*

‘I’m not interested,’ Will said slowly. ‘It isn’t personal. I’m not interested in anyone like that.’

‘You were moaning like a whore.’ The humiliation pulled deep inside, but Will swallowed it down. Matthew’s tone hadn’t sounded threatening and his eyes were closed with the memory, caught up in his excitement.

‘Any omega in heat sounds like that.’ Will cleared his throat. He stood up and brushed hands down his arms, as nonchalant as he could considering that he’d just refused a courtship. ‘Look, you need someone young and sweet that will honour you. I wouldn’t be able to do that.’

‘You want to die alone?’ *I won’t be alone, not anymore.* Will didn’t voice the thought. He was having a kid, and one day that kid would grow up and they might have a family and then Will would have one. A real one and it wouldn’t matter that there wasn’t anyone beside him. It would be enough.

‘I don’t want anyone,’ Will said again. ‘It isn’t personal to you.’

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Hannibal had spent the morning having a particularly industrious conversation with a city councillor regarding a vote of no-confidence that was being forced through later that evening. They sat at the bedside of the councillor’s ailing father, a man more vegetable than anything else after an unfortunate incident last year. Hospital rooms offered privacy like nothing else, and it was hardly untoward for a man to visit his father in hospital.

Hannibal was still sitting beside the bed when Will came into the room. It was sterile and noisy, but Hannibal enjoyed the clinical setting, enjoyed having time to himself to think without his men interrupting him. Will had called him a half hour ago, worked up enough that Hannibal permitted him a chance to talk with him here. It didn’t sound like it was something that could wait until later, and he would always grant Will an opportunity to speak with him when others couldn’t.

‘Do you know him?’ Will asked, eyes drawn to the man in the bed. Will looked windswept, his hair sitting in confused curls over his head. As he sat beside Hannibal in the private room, he tried to tame it. There was an air of fluster around him, his cheeks flushed as he poured himself a drink from the pitcher of water beside the bed.

‘He is the father of an associate.’ That garnered another confused look from Will, but he didn’t question further. One of Will’s many beauties was how he understood exactly what questions were best left unspoken.

‘We need to talk.’

Hannibal listened as Will explained Matthew’s proposition to him. For a moment Will’s voice disappeared beneath the blood pumping in his ears. He’s sure that no one would notice how the fury ploughed through his body at the thought of Matthew trying to lay a claim on Will.

‘He said something about how he wanted to have me, but he arrived after you, right?’

‘He was the one that picked up the trace on your whereabouts.’

Hannibal watched Will’s face as he processed his thoughts, his eyes flicking backwards and forwards, his frown deepening before he caught onto something that stuck. It was always a

joy to watch him gain clarity and understanding. Hannibal was always amused by the thought that if he had persevered with his previous career, he'd have made a fine detective.

'I think he agreed on the set up with Verger, but planned on intercepting. You were informed that I wasn't where I was supposed to be before he could intercept Verger. He changed tactics when he knew you were looking for me.'

The clouds cleared in Hannibal's mind, a small smirk curling onto his lips as he understood what Will was saying. 'You think his plan was to kill Verger and take you for himself?'

'It makes sense, right? I know… I know the way he looks at me, but I just ignored it.'

'You mustn't kill him. Not yet,' Hannibal said, eyes scanning Will's face for disappointment and was pleased with the nod he got. He understood.

'He might still have information on Verger?'

'I'll monitor him.' Verger had been at the back of Hannibal's mind for some time. A shadowy threat that he was waiting to take out when the moment struck. Verger was still so bitter about Cordell, still so wrapped up in the idea of Will that he hadn't quite re-emerged to declare his next step. The night at the opera had been little else but posturing. 'You are not to be alone in the room with Matthew. I want your word, Will.'

'I can handle him,' Will said, the flicker of delightful indignation stretching over his features.

'It's not you that I'm concerned about.'

'I think I probably humiliated him so he'll keep his distance,' Will said. 'Unless he tries to kill me. At which point, I will defend myself.'

'He won't attempt harm. He won't get anything out of you that way.'

Later, when Hannibal had finished thinking in the hospital and long after Will had left his side, he found Abigail sitting in the kitchen, slumped over the island, knuckles pressed into her cheek as she read a magazine. At her feet were piles of shopping bags.

'For when I start at the gallery,' she said, catching his eye. 'Expensive stuff.'

'I'm glad you have come around to my way of thinking.' Hannibal washed his hands at the sink, sleeves rolled up and eyes settled calmly on Abigail. She stared back calmly. 'Are we alone?'

'Yeah.'

'Then we must discuss something over dinner. I have something I would like for you to do for me.'

After dinner Abigail's eyes were alight, her cheeks rosy as Hannibal explained that he had a task for her. She looked at him seriously as he explained to her what he wanted her to do for him. It was nothing more than what she had already been doing in college. Watching alphas, waiting for them to display a weakness and then pouncing. She agreed to the plan on one condition.

'I want to go on suppressants,' she said. 'Before my next heat. I'm under twenty-one so I need a guardian's permission.'

'I can arrange that.'

'Thank you.' Her gratitude was genuine. He noticed the softening of her shoulders, as if she had been worried of his response. 'Will doesn't like people fighting his battles for him.'

Hannibal wasn't wanting much from her. But she had been so eager to stalk and hunt alphas when she was at college, setting her sights on Matthew wasn't any different. Hannibal would just have her watch him; flirt with him enough to distract Matthew's thoughts from consuming Will entirely. He needed Matthew to remain close, to keep Verger close. To do that he needed compliancy from everyone.

'I want something else for this too,' she said, but there was a softness to her voice, the playful side that she usually brought out when Will was around. Hannibal smiled at her, lending her his ear. 'Can we go to the lake house for Christmas? I think it would be a good chance to set things in motion.'

'You, myself, Will and Matthew?'

'Yeah,' she said, nodding. 'All of us.'

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Will barely noticed the glide of the wand over his stomach as he stared at the monitor. He could pretend to see what the technician pointed out. Something, the possibility of something. The something that he knew would turn to a *someone* in less than a year. There was nothing and yet his eyes couldn't tear themselves away from the monitor. Her wrist twisted, the scope gliding smoothly over his gel-slick stomach.

'This is what you've come for,' she said, pointing to the screen just as the thud-thud-thud of the tiny heartbeat started to pump audibly. If he hadn't been lying flat on his back, he was fairly certain he'd pass out.

'So it's definitely real,' Will had said, feeling the uncomfortable warmth inside. The rush of endorphins that he tried to dampener down. When he noticed the fond gaze the technician sent him, he realised he had been smiling.

Afterward, Will met Alana at a coffee shop around the corner from the clinic. It was busy with people dipping in and out between their last-minute Christmas shopping. Will watched them absently, the printout of the sonogram sitting on the table in front of him. He'd been

allowed to attend the scan by himself, although she had been at a doctor's appointment with him the evening prior. New medication to try and level out his blood pressure a little more.

Will looked out of the window, at the grey slush of the half-melted snow, at the small child holding her mother's hand as they walked past the window. She had a pink and yellow bobble hat, dotty rainboots. Will looked at her and wondered.

'You told me you were the manager of the jazz club,' Alana said, staring down at the scan when Will pushed it over to her. 'The club owned by Hannibal Lecter. Hannibal Lecter, among other things, is Abigail Hobb's guardian.'

'He has a lot of employees,' Will said calmly, pulling the scan back over so he could look. He could still hear the quickening of the heartbeat in his ears.

'Is Hannibal Lecter the father?' she asked. She sounded gentle, her pale hands smoothed over the plastic table, trying to reach to him. He kept his hands lowered. 'Is that why you're scared to tell him? I know… I know who he is. What he does.'

'I told you he was married. Hannibal isn't married, he's just my boss. I don't know what you're implying by what he does.' Will almost felt bad about lying to someone who seemed so desperate to help, but he wasn't sure he'd ever asked for her help. She was here because she was a requirement.

'Even married he deserves to know. Wouldn't you want to know?'

'There's little point answering a hypothetical.' Will pulled the scan toward him again, staring curiously at the swirls of nothingness. Not a real baby, not yet. But the *heartbeat.* The quick nervy thud-thud-thud. The way he had felt his heart expand with warmth at the very sound. 'He isn't going to risk his marriage over an unwanted pregnancy.'

Her head tilted. 'How do you think you'll tell him?'

'I'll tell him that I hope for nothing and expect nothing in return. He doesn't need to be involved. I don't need anyone else involved.'

'How will Hannibal respond?'

Will stared at her flatly, making sure she knew that he understood what she was trying to do. 'As a generous employer, I'm sure.'

'Nightclubs and newborns are not necessarily compatible, Will,' she said, as if she was trying to be kind. As if he wasn't aware of this in the first place. Her hand tried to reach his again, but he tucked his hands down beneath the table.

'Well, I'm sure I'll manage.'

'How long have you known Abigail?' Will didn't mind Alana. Sometimes he thought it was quite nice having someone to share this secret with. Someone that was on his side. That didn't mean he wanted her to pry into other aspects of his life. He could never be sure exactly what Abigail had told Dr Bloom about him.

‘Since she was fifteen.’ Will blinked away his own memories of that age. ‘She used to run away from boarding school, try and hitch a ride into the city. Hannibal would have me drive out to pick her up from whatever cop shop she landed up in. She lost her family. It’s hard on her.’

‘You understand her emotions.’

‘I know what it’s like to not want to be dictated by a corrupt society that holds our statuses as bottom of the heap. Where all of our actions and thought processes have to be accounted for and signed off on.’ Will gave her a precursory look before continuing, ‘We’re not irrational creatures.’

Alana didn’t say anything else for the moment, not when he was in the mood to shut her down so quickly. His eyes kept drawing back to the scan, just for the warmth that flooded his chest every time that he did.

‘What will you be doing to celebrate the holidays?’ Alana said to him eventually. He blinked at her slowly, wondering if he would be falling into a trap by answering.

‘I don’t normally. It’s just me. No family.’ Even when his father was alive it hadn’t been a big deal. Quiet. ‘Take the dogs out. Drink whiskey. Fall asleep.’ He never bothered with a tree. Never bothered with gifts. He remembered being really small, curled up in the corner with blankets, listening to the sounds of a tinny radio, of his dad tinkering away with a broken motor, Bing Crosby coming through the speakers.

‘Things will be different next year,’ Alana reminded him as if he hadn’t already done the math. The baby would be around five months old next Christmas. Too young to appreciate a tree – but he’d want it to be special. Just the two of them and his dogs. It would be special. He’d have a proper family.

He asked what she was doing, to be courteous because he knew that he wasn’t easy. She talked about her family and he tried to nod his head, but his eyes wandered back to the scan. He didn’t shrug her hand away from his shoulder as he stared down at the image, didn't look up even when she said goodbye.

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The next time Will was at Hannibal’s place, it had been decorated for Christmas. In the foyer stood a grand Christmas tree, standing tall to the floor above. Will stared at it, at the tasteful gold and red baubles balanced equally on all the branches. It wasn’t to Will’s taste, and he wasn’t entirely convinced it was Hannibal’s either, but he was a man that enjoyed putting on a show.

Hannibal always threw nauseatingly decadent Christmas dinner parties. Fundraisers for charities. Galas for the hospital wing. Will was invited to some, though he never attended. Most years Abigail would stay with distant relations, ones that wouldn’t take her in, but felt enough guilt to hold a place for her at their dining table.

‘We’re going to the lake house,’ Abigail said to him, when he asked what she would be doing. She’d started at the art gallery now, and he took in her polished appearance as they stood in the parlour. In heels, she was almost eye level with him. She looked a lot more grown up.

‘Just you and Hannibal?’

‘I said you’d come. You know the three of us *hate* Christmas. He spends the entire time making sure that everyone *knows* he throws the best parties, dines people out on the best food and wine, but I know that he spends it alone.’

‘Are you not going to your aunt’s?’

‘Nope. We just make each other sad. She’s not really family, is she? I’m just an obligation.’ Her eyes, which had clouded briefly, turned back to him. She raised an eyebrow, leaning in. ‘You never talk about *your* family.’

Will had a sudden flashback, so vivid he could almost smell the hospital. The omega ward where he had given birth. Breathing the scent of his son down into his lungs. How the soft downy hair had tickled the wedge of skin between nose and lip. His father standing awkwardly beside the bed, dirty coveralls and his woollen hat clutched in his fingers like he wasn’t sure what to do. He blinked it away and tried to cover any emotion on his face by turning to look at the tree again.

‘I’m on my own.’ He swallowed against the heat in his chest that tried to overwhelm. *Not for much longer.*

‘Exactly. If we’re all on our own, then we should be on our own together. I asked him and he said we could go. Just for a few days.’

‘You sound very eager.’ Will eyed her beside him. He’d always been able to read her well, and now wasn’t any different. She sounded genuine. ‘Is this really what you want?’

‘Yeah. But you can’t talk work the entire time we’re there.’

‘Alright.’ Will laughed, distracted. He liked that about her, how manipulating she could be, how easy he was to manipulate.

Will wasn’t convinced it was a good idea; a whirlwind that he was getting caught up in. It was romantic, wasn’t it? To spend Christmas with the alpha that fathered what was growing in his belly? Hannibal didn’t know, but it *felt* romantic. By the New Year he’d hardly be able to hide it. Hannibal saw him naked, knew what he felt like beneath his heavy hands. The slight swelling of his stomach would give it away. He could give himself this. Could give himself the holidays and then let it all come out.

He felt guilty for abandoning the dogs, but he’d found a sitter that was happy enough to see to them over the Christmas period. He had to remind himself that they didn’t understand what Christmas was. And it was only for a few days. He’d be back before New Years Eve, it was the busiest night at the club.

He drove up to the lake on Christmas Eve. It felt like he was walking into a trap. The holidays put him on edge. Everyone always wanted something from someone else. Secrets always came out, or emotions that were kept at bay seeped out of people drunk on festive liquor. He saw it time and time again.

And his secret that was growing inside him was *his*. The first time around he hadn't been aware until too late, until his clothes stopped fitting and he chanced it with a stolen pregnancy test. But this was different. He could have everything, just for a little while. Once Hannibal knew everything would be over. He would claim ownership of the child and therefore claim ownership over Will, try and convince him to mate. To bond. To be led by biology rather than his own mind. And Will wouldn't have that, he'd rather burn the bridge to stop himself crossing it. Will wiped at his cold nose with the back of his gloved hand, fiddling with the heater until it warmed up.

Will parked up next to the Bentley and looked up at the house in wonder. Hannibal may have called it a cabin, but Will wasn't convinced. It was a sprawling house of stone and glass, sprawled wide, the wide stone steps leading down directly to the mouth of the lake, a woodsy bracken of trees either side. It was separate from civilisation. Secluded. Will liked it immediately.

He had felt out of place when he arrived, standing in the open-plan living area. Hannibal had been on the phone to someone, standing tall in the kitchen but Abigail had pulled him into a *festive hug* and told him they should go for a walk before the sun goes down.

'I feel as if I walked right into your trap,' Will told Abigail as they walked away from the house, following the edge of the lake, and moving down into the woods. Will had a sudden desire to bring his dogs out here. They would love it, or he would love to see them here. He wasn't sure what way round. 'You're trying to set us up.'

'Not really,' she said, in that affecting tone he'd noticed on most teenage girls he'd interacted with. 'You're already having sex with him and I knew you'd be lonely in that little house. You could cosy up in front of the fire together. I wouldn't mind.'

He laughed along, letting her tug his elbow into a shape to fit her arm through. 'You know the bond doesn't go both ways, right? I'd be changed, but he wouldn't. I'd miss him when we were apart. I'd feel him inside my head. I don't want to mate with him and I don't have to. That's enough.'

'Alphas feel things too. He'd protect you.'

'Isn't it my job to protect him?'

'Hannibal likes that you have your own mind.' There was a flicker of something between the trees, just off in the distance. Will slowed his footsteps, spare hand moving to his hip before he realised it was just a stag, watching them from afar. It didn't make him feel any more settled.

'You really think you know him?'

‘I know he killed my father. I know the only reason he didn’t kill me was because he saw an opportunity. I know that, Will. You do too. But you can’t pick your family, not even your second one. I know he cares about me now. I know he cares about you too.’

‘I don’t have any real notion of what family is,’ Will admitted. It sounded like an admission he’d confess to Alana, who would continue probing with her kind eyes.

‘It’s putting up with each other over the holiday season mostly,’ she said brightly. She let him turn them, heading back the way they came. Leading them back to where the sprawling house glowed bright in the distance.

Will felt like his skin was itching all night. It wasn’t normal. He wanted the comfort of his own company, of his dogs back home who never questioned when he fell apart. He didn’t quite feel like he was *intruding*, he never felt that way around Hannibal and Abigail, but it still didn’t feel normal. There were no men around, no other alphas giving Will a tension headache. It was only the warmth in his chest and the gentle buzzing he got around Hannibal.

Hannibal had served a light dinner, something that he’d cooked prior to their arrival. It was French-sounding and layered with rich tomatoes and spices that Will couldn’t quite decipher but they left him feeling warm inside and out. Afterward Will sat by the fire, in an armchair opposite Hannibal. Abigail was on the phone to her friend in another room, every so often her laughter would burst through the walls, reminding them that she was close.

‘Tomorrow Matthew will be joining us for dinner,’ Hannibal said, and Will knew all his tells so well at this point. The swirl of his wine, the way his eyes flickered to Will, anticipating a reaction. Will licked his lips, feeling the burn of frustration. Matthew sold him out. Matthew nearly got him killed. It could have been Matthew’s larynx he ripped out with his teeth. Alpha flesh between his teeth would have felt even better than Cordell’s. His fingers curled on the arms of the chair, his breathing deep when he finally bought himself around.

‘Why?’

‘I have him running things back home. He hasn’t any other family to spend the day with.’ Hannibal paused deliberately, Will knew this. ‘Abigail quite likes him.’

‘She hasn’t said anything to me.’

‘When Abigail is happy, I find her much more compliant,’ Hannibal said, his eyes shining. Will watched the reflection of the light bouncing, watched how much Hannibal enjoyed stirring him up. ‘Your scent is strong tonight, Will.’

‘I didn’t bring any neutraliser. I didn’t see the point as I’m in company that—’ He’d stood in front of his bathroom cabinet at home, debating about packing it. He hadn’t seen the point. He knew he would end up in Hannibal’s bed, and Abigail didn’t care. He hadn’t factored Matthew into the occasion.

‘I’m glad you feel relaxed enough.’

‘But Matthew – you’re comfortable with him around her?’ Will persisted, ignoring the flush that he knew was rising up his neck, warming his cheeks. ‘He nearly had me.’

‘You would never have allowed that,’ Hannibal reminded him.

‘I’d kill him if he even got close to me. Or Abigail.’ Will might not even kill him if he touched Abigail. He’d rip the knot from his cock with his bared teeth, leave him with a gaping wound and shove it down his throat. Make him pay for even looking at her the wrong way.

‘You would.’ Hannibal nodded. He took a large sip of wine and closed his eyes. Will stared at the high planes of his face, the way the orange of the fire warmed his skin. He looked hot to touch. Will wanted to stand from his chair and hold him, feel his skin beneath his fingers. Feel for cracks in it; cracks in the marble that Will could sink into. To kiss them away.

He took another sip himself and then placed the glass on the end table by his chair. Hannibal’s eyes flickered open, watching Will’s movements.

‘And you will. When the time comes.’

‘Are you anticipating another betrayal? You want to catch him in the act?’ Will heard Abigail’s laughter as she spoke through her cell phone again. She hadn’t laughed at all when he had first met her; a white-washed ghost. Now, the sound warmed his chest.

‘His recklessness will outweigh his ambition. I’m curious to see how far he will go. We’ll all watch him.’

‘Abigail is playing him like she did the alphas at college?’ Will asked, already knowing the answer. His fingers curled tighter into the leather. ‘You’ve set her to it?’

‘She’s eager to please.’ Hannibal turned his head to the left. Will watched his profile, his heart slowing even as he felt the chemicals in his brain stirring up something. He forced himself to look away, touching his knuckles to his warm cheek.

Will showered before bed. He stood under the water, cooler than he was comfortable with, to wake himself up and rewire his brain. His brain couldn’t shut down, not from Hannibal and the games he was playing; with Abigail and her sudden interest in Matthew. In how Hannibal was expecting Will to end the game at just the right time.

Will heard both Abigail and Hannibal moving from the downstairs up to their bedrooms as he dried off from his shower. When he was mostly dry, he crept down the wooden stairs, barefoot in his white shirt and pyjama bottoms. It was still warm, from the fire burned out to dying embers, but the rest of the house held a chill from lack of use. Will stood in the dimmed kitchen and noticed how Hannibal had meticulously cleaned the kitchen before bed, the wineglasses left to air dry, the plates stacked away. Will stood against the cool steel of the refrigerator and closed his eyes.

He took three deep breaths, right down into his lungs. On the fourth, a familiar perfumed scent filled his senses, his body starting to tingle. He peeled his eyes open and noticed the tall

silhouette of Hannibal peeling from the shadows. He was still dressed in the clothes he had been in all day, a loose blue button-down shirt. Slacks. Dressed as if he had been waiting for the moment that Will would stumble alone into the kitchen.

‘Be careful,’ Will started, head still rocked back onto the steel refrigerator. ‘The last time we were alone in a kitchen I ended up face down on the tiles.’

‘Yes, I remember,’ Hannibal’s open expression caught Will in a shiver as he remembered. ‘Shall we make some new memories?’

‘Real smooth, Hannibal.’ Will didn’t fight when Hannibal approached him. Will was half pressed into the refrigerator as hands circled his waist, pulling their bodies tight. His body relaxed at the touch of large hands sliding beneath his shirt, cool fingers seeking out his warm skin; of the mouth pressing down over his. He kissed back, looping his arms over his shoulders, until his hands found purchase in Hannibal’s hair.

Lips moved down his jaw, nipping at his skin, sucking a bruise to the side of his throat where his scent was strongest. There was the threat of teeth, even when Will trusted Hannibal not to bite. Greedy hands curled down, palming lightly. Will had been half-hard since he’d stepped out of the shower and he had been trying to ignore it. Hannibal was only making him stiffer, deft fingers pressing across the length.

‘Not down here,’ Will whispered, but he didn’t stop Hannibal from sliding his fingers into the waistband of his pyjamas, pulling them down until they pooled at his ankles. Hannibal was down on his knees just as Will rested his head back against the steel block behind him. He watched behind lidded eyes as Hannibal mouthed at the head of his thickening cock, already oozing pre-come.

Will choked back a moan as Hannibal’s warm mouth enveloped him, one fist firmly around the base of his cock. He would remind himself of Hannibal on his knees the next time someone made a comment about Will being his bitch. This man owned all of Baltimore and all the powerful men in it, and yet it was Will’s slick coating his face when he moved his face deeper between his legs; it was Will’s body he was always so willing to worship.

Long fingers slid behind Will’s stiff cock to tease in a gentle caress where he was slick and dripping, as his lips moved to tease the head of Will’s flushed cock again. Will closed his eyes to the sensation, as fingers pressed inside, just as Hannibal’s lips left tight little kisses across the length of his cock, loosening his grip at the base.

When Hannibal stood up it was with a damp chin and swollen lips, lit up by nothing by the lights glowing from the hallway behind them. Will felt lightheaded, but he still sucked Hannibal’s tongue into his mouth, tasting himself, his own hands shaking slightly as he grasped at Hannibal’s belt, pulling it open and shoving his hand inside, fingers seeking out the familiar feel of Hannibal’s heavy cock. Will was overwhelmed by desperation, by a need that only Hannibal could sate.

Will was hoisted up, one arm on the edge of the refrigerator as Hannibal’s arm slid beneath his left thigh, lifting it as he lined himself up. Will shuddered as he felt the blunt intrusion, the ache that came with the familiar stretch as his body parted. Hannibal didn’t have much

leverage until he pulled Will away from the refrigerator and lifted him to sit on the closest worktop.

‘Fucking on the countertops?’ Will gritted out, bare skin arching at the sensation of cool marble beneath him as he was pulled until his hips lined up with the edge of the counter. He braced himself on his elbows stretched out behind him, legs held open and apart by Hannibal. Will played with his own cock lightly, pulling it up so that he could watch Hannibal tease his own leaking cock against his dripping entrance. Will felt his thighs shake, one held tight in Hannibal’s grip as his body opened in a slick shudder.

Hannibal fucked him like that. Will moved across the cool countertop with ease, slickened by sweat and the grasp of Hannibal’s large hands. In the darkness, in the silence of the rest of the house, he was certain they were making too much noise, but he couldn’t stop the gasping, the groan when Hannibal pulled him forward so forcefully that there was a wet slap of skin hitting skin. He was relentless, and Will couldn’t do anything but take it in this position.

‘You like that?’ he asked, sliding a hand down his slick wet belly to wrap around his leaking cock. His shirt had shucked up just beneath his nipples, the fabric catching where they peaked. Hannibal was still fully dressed while he was debauched, ravaged entirely on the same worktop that Hannibal had prepared their food on earlier. There was no way in *hell* that Hannibal would allow this in his kitchen back home.

Hannibal tugged him upright by the front of his shirt, pulling them closer until Will’s dripping cunt clenched tight against the fat knot seeking entrance. As their lips battered together in jagged movements, too much tongue and teeth, Will nodded his head at the silent request. Hannibal’s hands unfurled from their bruising grip on his thighs to cradle his hips, drawing Will closer and closer, the pain-pain-pleasure pulled a gasping moan from Will as his body accepted Hannibal’s knot. It had been a while since he had allowed it.

‘No one else has you like this,’ Hannibal was saying into Will’s mouth, the two of them pinned together by the knot and Will’s legs over his waist. His hand slid down Will’s back, holding him by the base of his spine, the other wrapping over the slick head of Will’s cock. His gip was tight, twisting on every upward motion in the way he knew Will liked; fucking his wet cock into his fist.

‘No one.’ Will was unashamed as he rode out his own orgasm, kissing slowly, the bite of Hannibal’s sharp teeth, the hands curling into his sweat-slick hair adding to the prickling of oversensitivity. Will’s ankles locked over Hannibal’s waist and Hannibal’s movements became more jagged until he started to come, an open-mouthed kiss to the base of Will’s throat; Will’s body milking his knot as his legs clamped tight to his hips.

They kissed, locked together. Beneath the haze of orgasm Will wanted to ask Hannibal why he was here. Was it just about companionship? Was this truly Abigail’s desire to have them all here or something else? Was this *love*? He didn’t say it, didn’t say any of it because he could never quite grasp words when he was this well-fucked.

Afterwards, Will stood on shaky legs, wads of paper towels held between his legs as Hannibal wiped down the kitchen counters. Will had the absurd desire to do this in Baltimore, to see how far he could push Hannibal. Instead he allowed himself to be kissed,

allowed himself to be steadied and moved until they'd climbed the stairs and Hannibal was leading him to his bedroom. Hannibal kissed him good night, but Will shook his head, pulling Hannibal into the room.

'Sleep in here with me.'

When Will awoke the next morning, it was with bright light pouring into the room. He hadn't bothered closing the black-out drapes the night before and now a panoramic view of the lake burned through his sleepy haze as his eyes blinked open. He stared for a while, letting the dregs of sleep fall away, aware of another body in the bed behind him. The soft turning of pages every so often. He arched his back, the general nausea he dealt with most mornings was churning his stomach, but not enough for him to feel the need to rush to the bathroom.

As he rolled onto his back, he noticed Hannibal sitting up in the bed beside him. He had a book in his hand, a delicate paperback that looked weathered with age; Will couldn't quite read the title with his blurry eyes, but he didn't care to either.

'Good morning, Will,' Hannibal said, in a tone that suggested he had been awake a great deal longer than Will had. Will nodded, wiping his hand over his face.

'Keep thinking my dogs would like it here.'

'Yes. There is no reason why you couldn't bring them next time.' There was so much insinuation in the comment, stuff that should have Will squirming away nervously, but he didn't fight it. Instead he imagined the dogs curled up in front of the fireplace, taking them out for long walks along the length of the lake; the sounds their paws would make clicking on the stone floor downstairs.

'Maybe, yeah,' Will said instead. He looked to the small alarm clock on the nightstand and noticed it was just after seven. Too early, he thought, for him to even think about going anywhere. 'You're up early.'

'I needed to prepare the turkey.' There was a pause, where Will suddenly remembered that today was Christmas Day and people ate copious amounts of turkey for reasons that Will didn't know. He used to eat turkey sandwiches with his dad, that was as traditional as they got.

'And now you're reading?'

'Yes. Would you like me to read to you?' Hannibal offered as Will inched closer. His body still felt sated from the night before and he wasn't needed anywhere. Wasn't needed at the club or at home. Had no psychiatrist appointment, had no one to deal with. He could just *be.*

'No. I don't want you to read to me,' Will said, moving closer until he could rest his cheek down against Hannibal's chest, his hand sliding beneath the woollen sweater to feel heated skin. Hannibal's arms fell over him, until he was held close, trapped by the two hands, happy to read quietly to himself as Will settled.

He only napped for forty minutes or so before heading off to take a shower. He scrubbed his thighs almost raw, until Hannibal's dried fluid from the night before finally peeled away. At one point he rested the flat of his palm against his stomach, thinking about when the bottom would fall out of this entire thing. Not today at least. He'd allow himself this and see where the New Year would find him.

'Was it different where you grew up?' Will asked when he re-entered the bedroom. The bed was made, sheets drawn tight, pillows plumped. Hannibal was standing in front of the window, an unfamiliar glaze to his eyes. He almost seemed sad as he looked out, or very lonely at least.

'It was…different. Lots of family. Lots of food.' Will pulled clothes on, straight from his bag, everything a little crumpled. As he listened, he thought to the parties that Hannibal threw in Baltimore, wondered if he was trying to replicate his experiences growing up.

'You don't talk about your family,' Will said.

'Neither of us have been particularly willing on that part.' Hannibal's head tilted in his direction and Will looked away briefly. His dad had been dead ten years now and it ached in an odd way, a constant thrum of loneliness and disappointment. Regret over how he had dealt with certain things and then the frustration that followed after.

'My dad's dead and it was just the two of us.'

'Alpha?'

Will shook his head, 'beta.'

'Mine are all dead. I had a sister.' He looked like he regretted speaking, something that seemed so utterly foreign to Hannibal. His face turned toward the window again, escaping Will's gaze. 'She was killed a while after we lost our parents.'

'I'm sorry.' Will moved forward, not thinking about why he wanted to hold Hannibal, just that he needed to. Will stood behind him, arms sliding around Hannibal's chest, face buried into the warmth of his sweater. Like this, he could feel Hannibal's steady breathing, his heartbeat slow and smooth.

'I decided to raise Abigail on behalf of Mischa. Decided to raise a young woman like I was supposed to raise her. Where I failed with my sister, I want to prevail with my surrogate daughter. Build her up to be something strong. I never had a chance with my sister.'

'Are they much alike?' Will rested his cheek against the broad planes of Hannibal's back, soaking in the scent of him, soaking in the words; the tiny glimpse into a past that Hannibal had kept just as quiet as Will had with his own.

'Not one bit.' Hannibal turned so that they were facing and smiled at Will, though it was a sad one. For a moment they just stared at each other. Will knew grief to be irrational; he didn't want to ruin the moment with fake placation. 'Did you share Christmases with your father growing up?'

‘He would get wasted on bootlegged moonshine and tell me one day I’d have the real deal.’ Will licked his lips where they had dried and tried to remember exactly how his dad looked. He pictured outfits, and haircuts, his forever dirty-hands, but his face had long-since faded. ‘He always planned on selling me off to a wealthy alpha. So I could have a life better than what he could give me.’

‘That didn’t happen.’ Will wasn’t inclined to fill in the gaps between his childhood and Hannibal meeting him as a sad and drugged up cop, so he simply shook his head instead.

‘How do you say Merry Christmas in Lithuanian?’

Hannibal’s brow lifted in surprise as he answered, ‘Linksmų Kalėdų’

‘Yeah, that.’ When Will smiled, so did Hannibal, their mouths meeting briefly in a gentle kiss. ‘Happy Christmas, Hannibal.’

As Hannibal left to take a shower Will walked downstairs and pulled on his coat, hat and boots. He took a slow walk into the snow-covered bracken, meandering down toward the lake when he couldn’t resist it any longer. He took deep breaths, soaking in the satedness right down into his bones. He wasn’t used to it. Wasn’t used to waking up feeling safe and calm. Content. His life existed on the uneasy planes of a constant rocking boat, his own faith in keeping himself upright had always been enough.

He stared out at the still lake before him, at the gentle stillness. He absorbed the view before him, enjoyed how insignificant he felt compared to the trees and the lake and the stretch of silence that surrounded him. Will pulled his phone from his pocket. Debated, but rationalised. Dr Bloom was his therapist and he called on her so infrequently.

‘Will, hi,’ Alana said, answering on the last ring.

‘Oh yeah, happy holidays. I…is this a bad time? I can call back.’ Will flustered, his teeth clamping down in a grimace. He took a seat on a log, ignoring how the dampness soaked into his jeans. He watched as a boat slowly rocked side to side, far off on the other side of the lake.

‘No, let me just—' Will listened to the soft rustling on the phone, the sound of a door creaking as Alana moved to a different room.

‘I shouldn’t have disturbed you. Are you with family?’

‘Has something happened, Will? To call your therapist on Christmas Day.’ She was no longer whispering but making it clear that her own private life was out of bounds. Will usually enjoyed boundaries, it kept people away.

‘I forgot the importance it holds. Sorry.’ He’d been so grateful that the lake house didn’t hold a tree. That there was no real expectation on any of them apart from a Christmas lunch – not

dissimilar from something that Hannibal would cook for them any other time. ‘No. I just wondered, uh. Omegas. Can we form a bond before it’s official? Like without a heat.’

Will noticed the hesitation before she spoke and gritted his teeth hard. ‘You’re not with him now, surely. He should be with his wife.’

‘They’re having time apart and that doesn’t matter. I asked you a question.’ Will felt the blood pumping even as the cold bit at his face. He rubbed his free hand over his forehead, embarrassed that he even had to ask.

‘What is it you’re feeling?’

‘An ease of contentment. A willingness to just be without consequence.’ He thought back to how he’d felt curled up with Hannibal, dozing on his chest as Hannibal read silently. ‘I struggle with both those things on a regular occurrence. As you are aware.’

‘Biology is only half the battle. I know you consider the mind and body as two separate entities but sometimes they work in sync. ‘

‘So it is a thing. I’m bonding to him. Is it… can I stop it?’

Alana’s laugh was clear, although he didn’t think it was at him. ‘Will, what you’re feeling doesn’t sound specific to your status. Sounds like a good dose of regular dopamine.’

‘You think this is love?’ Will wasn’t sure either he or Hannibal were capable of love in that sense. He loved Abigail. He loved his son. He had the sense of love about the one growing inside him too. He hadn’t ever loved someone romantically. ‘Love complicates things.’

‘I worry your situation is complicated enough,’ she said calmly. There was always so much pity in her voice that it brought heat to his skin even in the winter sun. ‘It’s only going to hurt more when the bottom falls out.’

‘Yeah, I’m anticipating that.’ Will looked behind him, where the house was glowing with warm light. He noticed the chimney clouding the stark sky. A lit fire sounded nice, warmer than the damp log he was sitting on. Alana was talking at him, but he wasn’t listening as he stood up. ‘Sorry I interrupted you this morning. Enjoy the holidays, Dr Bloom.’

Matthew had shown up at some point in the earlier hours. Will could smell his scent on the air, felt an irrational tug inside at how his mind had started to muddle again with the two alpha scents. He preferred when it was just Hannibal’s in his head.

He chopped veg for Hannibal as Abigail and Matthew watched television in the room next door. He could hear the unfamiliar dialogue of classic Christmas movies that he had never seen and it was less an irritant and more a way to distract his mind from the conversation with Alana. He should never have called her. When he was back home, she’d only ask more questions and he’d have to tell more lies.

‘Your technique needs adjusting.’ Hannibal was behind him when Will came back to reality. Chest close to Will’s back, arms sneaking around, hands covering his own wrapped over a knife. Will’s hand was adjusted on the blade’s handle, fingers rearranged. Will held the position as Hannibal pressed the side of his cheek against Will’s. Will let Hannibal move his hands, helping him slice the carrots into thin slithers. When it lay in smooth orange slices, he pulled the knife from Will’s hands, placing it down on the chopping board.

‘What are we doing?’ Will asked, enveloped in the warmth of Hannibal’s embrace. He leaned back, just a little. ‘What are we playing at?’

‘Are we playing? I wasn’t sure.’

‘It can’t be like this back home,’ Will reminded him. He was a distraction to Hannibal, an omega that kept him ticking over nicely. That sat on his knot every so often and calmed him down when he needed it.

‘Even if you would like it to be?’ Hannibal’s chin rested down against his shoulder, his scent overpowering Will enough that his eyes flickered shut.

‘I like how it is now in this moment,’ Will said, turning his head. His lips caught Hannibal’s cheek, his nose rubbing against bone. He felt caught; he felt so much that he wasn’t sure if it was his feelings or Hannibal’s. ‘I don’t know what that means for later.’

Will mostly ignored Matthew as they sat around to eat dinner. It was easier than he realised. Abigail’s ability to flirt needed work, but she was young and pretty and that seemed enough to keep Matthew suitably distracted. Will knew that she could keep herself relatively safe; she had played with enough alphas in college to not get burned, but he still worried. He was still angry at Hannibal for involving her, he just hadn’t been able to form a strong enough argument to bring it up.

Abigail and Hannibal dominated the conversation. She’d ask questions and he’d answer in a manner that had Will fumbling the explanation over in his mind. He drank water instead of wine and prayed that Hannibal didn’t notice that he avoided the alcohol they were all served.

Matthew watched him, but not enough for Will to really call him out on it. He watched Abigail too, and Hannibal, between helpings of potatoes and greens and carrots. The food was good, basic for Hannibal, but rich enough that it still felt decadent.

At one point when Abigail was distracting Matthew with something, Hannibal leaned over, his lips almost brushing the shell of his ear. ‘The carrots are exquisitely sliced.’

‘I had a little help.’ Will couldn’t stop the smile, or avoid the warmth folding over his chest at the compliment. He swallowed thickly when he realised how pleased it was making him feel. He bit his tongue until it hurt. Thought about what Alana had said about this being more like love than anything else.

Hannibal took another phone call from one a lawyer working overtime while everyone else cleaned up. As Will stacked clean dishes, and Abigail piled the refrigerator with leftovers, Will watched as Matthew pressed two fingers along the countertop – the one Hannibal had fucked him on the night before – and lifted his fingers to his lips. Will looked away uneasily.

Later, when Hannibal was off the phone, Abigail dragged Matthew with her to fetch firewood. Will was too full of food and contentment to remind her that damp wood would take a long while to be of any use. Instead he pulled on his own coat and boots, yanked his hat down over the tops of his ears, and sat on the damp steps of the porch with a mug of hot tea.

Will looked out at the lake, at the mountains, at the sun glinting a golden glow over the water. Down at the edge of the woods, Abigail and Matthew were flirting again. He thought briefly to Matthew's actions regarding the countertops and remembered Hannibal saying they needed to wait for the right moment to strike. It would come. Will wrapped his fingers around his mug and watched as Hannibal took a seat beside him.

'Thank you for telling me about your sister,' he said, burning his lips on his tea. The steam warmed up his frozen nose. Beside him, Hannibal wrapped his scarf tighter. They were both still. No longer preoccupied with dinner.

'I carry her with me. Always. Wherever I go. Some days I feel her more than others. This time of year, she feels like a constant presence. I usually dislike the holiday season for that reason.'

'But not this year?' Will asked, eyes on Hannibal's unreadable expression. It was a mask, one that he hadn't quite adjusted when he had spoken of Mischa earlier in the day.

'Not this year, no.'

'I had a kid. A son.' The words were out of Will's mouth before he had a chance to swallow them back. He looked over to Hannibal, who couldn't hide his surprise, but at least it softened the blank expression from before.

'When you were Abigail's age?' Hannibal tilted his head minutely, towards where Abigail's laughter carried over the wind. She was so happy that Will couldn't discredit whatever fake form of dalliance she was currently participating in with Matthew.

'I was fifteen. Got drunk one summer with one of the rich kids that hung out on their parents' yachts.'

'Was it consensual?' Will had been raised on stories about omegas falling into the wrong hands. He'd always been thankful that ruining himself for his father's plans had kept him out of anyone's clutches.

'More or less.' Will had been flirted with and had resisted until the moment that he hadn't wanted to anymore. Briefly bought into the romance of his own seduction until he was half naked and on his back, a rich young alpha thrusting between his legs and telling Will to *stop fucking whining and enjoy himself.*

‘A summer fling then.’ Hannibal almost sounded like he was trying to justify Will’s actions.

‘Not even sure it was that. I was on the cusp, but I hadn’t had my first heat yet. He said I wouldn’t get pregnant. Dad hadn’t ever explained anything to me, so I didn’t know—I didn’t know *anything*.’ Will tried to explain as his tea cooled between his hands. He explained how he had told the baby’s father that he was pregnant, how he thought he’d bond with him, commit to him or at the very least take some of the blame; mostly he had panicked. Will could still see the shock on his own father’s face when it had come out five months into the pregnancy. He’d never been scared of his dad until that moment; until the rage had turned his face a violent red, furious at how Will had destroyed his plans for him.

‘Obviously it backfired. The…the dad’s family said they’d take the kid if they were an alpha. They’d give us money to stay away. Dad prayed for an alpha so it wasn’t another mouth he’d have to feed.’

‘I take it he was an alpha.’

Will nodded his head as the memory suddenly burst to life. The exhaustive pain of birth, of the nurses who wavered between kind and horrified. ‘He was mine for an hour. They let me hold him, let me nurse him. I’d been traumatised during the whole pregnancy, but I wanted him. I remember this feeling of being whole. Of not knowing I hadn’t been whole in the first place until he was in my arms and suddenly it all made sense. Dad sat awkward in the chair beside the bed as I started trying to convince him that I could cope. That I wanted to keep him. No one had been interested in what I wanted the whole way through.’

Will couldn’t stop himself now that he had started. He wasn’t sure he’d ever spoken as much to anyone before. He certainly hadn’t spoken of *this* to anyone. Even Alana only got one-word responses about it.

‘The nurse came in and said I needed to go get some scans. I made my dad promise to stay with him. I uh. I called him Felix. I said stay with Felix and then I’ll be back and it will all work out.’ Will licked his lips as the mountains and the lakes swam in front of him. He felt a hand press on top of his and it soothed the ache in his chest a little. ‘There weren’t any scans. They just said it so I would leave. When I got back he was gone. I didn’t even get to say goodbye. Everyone was in on it.’

‘That was unbearably cruel,’ Hannibal said, his fingers tight around Will’s. Will nodded his head, catching his breath through the pain. The scene in front of him became Monet-soft as his vision blurred. He hadn’t thought about it in this much detail in such a long time. He always stopped himself.

‘Dad moved us away to another state; a better house with the money but I didn’t care. I didn’t speak for six months. I never did forgive him. He was doing what he thought was the right thing, but I was just a kid.’

‘You haven’t seen Felix since?’

‘They used to send my dad a photo every year. No update. Not the name they gave him. That stopped when dad died. The most recent is from a decade ago. He was six.’ Will held the

remains of his mug between his knees as he fished his wallet from his coat pocket. He flipped it open and carefully plucked the folded photograph he kept hidden in the zippered coin section. It had been folded and unfolded so many times that scores of white had bled through the image. He wished he'd taken better care of it; that he'd made a copy. He handed it over and watched Hannibal study it.

His son, blue eyed and freckle-faced with two large gaps at the front where his baby teeth had fallen out, smiling a crooked grin. Will felt the yearning deep in his chest; for the newborn he'd held and loved, for the six-year-old that he never got to know, for the teenager he was now. 'He probably had a better life than I could have given him.'

'Thank you for telling me,' Hannibal said, and when Will looked over at him, he looked struck with something almost like shock. It wasn't an emotion that suited him, made Will feel uncomfortable. They'd shared a lot between them in the last 24 hours. 'He may come to find you one day.'

'Maybe,' Will said, unsure how he felt about that. There'd be too many questions to answer. He wasn't the kid that had given birth, he had become something so much worse. 'God knows what he was told about me.'

'The alignment of your personality makes more sense now,' Hannibal said. He was still holding Will's hand, smiling at him. Will had almost been anticipating an argument, where Hannibal would be furious to not know. But they weren't…they weren't a couple. They just took comfort in each other sometimes. Everything else was unnecessary. 'After that confession I can't imagine there are any more secrets left to spill.'

'No,' Will lied, smiling at the way Hannibal was looking at him, at the warmth that settled in his chest even as his stomach churned. He looked away first, still squeezing tight to his hand. 'No more secrets.'

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Thank you again for all the lovely feedback :)

His body was preemptively bonding, Will knew that. He had spent too much time around an alpha that felt compatible, who was safe. Who had cared for him and fed him and not pitied him, but listened when he spoke; treated him how an omega wanted to be treated, even one as damaged as he was. Distance would fix it. A bite would seal the deal. Sharing a heat would sanctify it. Will wouldn't be having a heat any time soon, and Hannibal would wake up to that soon enough. Distance would fix it.

Things were running smoothly elsewhere; Hannibal hadn't called on his services, and Abigail was busy with a social life that unnerved him. He was wary of what she was doing with Matthew, how they flirted with each other, but never seemed to take it beyond the incessant giggling stage. He wanted to warn her off, wanted to put his knife to Matthew's bobbing throat and tell him to leave her the hell alone. Neither were in it for the romance.

New Year's kept him busy at the club. The lights and the sounds kept his nausea close to the surface, so he stayed in the office until he was needed. Fights outside, fights *inside.* There wasn't a moments peace, but he liked it. He liked driving home and seeing his dogs. He liked sitting in his nest, which wasn't a nest, and staring at the scan in wonder.

He laid in his bed most nights and thought back on those moments up at the lake house, trying to recall if his favourite times were the afternoons where he'd be reading by the fire, half an ear on the bleed out of Abigail's music coming from her earbuds, with Hannibal sketching at the table. Their eyes would meet every so often, and Will would feel that flood of excitement inside. Dopamine. Maybe. Like Alana said. The burgeoning beginnings of a bond. More than anything, they felt like a family. Or what he imagined family felt like.

Or maybe the midnight baths, curled up against Hannibal's chest, his hands over his eyes, shutting out the thoughts. Or that waking up beside a warm body was so much more bearable than the cold side of the bed. Or the morning sex that he found himself craving. Hannibal's lips and his soft hair and his strong fingers curling inside Will, their bodies slotting together as they worked out a silent rhythm over the sheets. It was hard falling asleep in sheets that smelled only of himself. No alpha.

The next time he found himself at Hannibal's was five days into January. His suit didn't fit quite right. He preferred a slim cut, which meant any incremental change in his body made

things more difficult. Made things a little snugger. No one would know, he wasn't even sure that Hannibal would be able to tell. But the clock started ticking a little louder over his head.

At dinner, a boring affair with too many people, Will picked at his food. Last night he'd been called to help Tier out with a traitor. It had exhausted him to the point he had vomited by the side of his car as they finished up. Side effects of his medication. That's what he told himself. Beneath the table, Hannibal's hand rested upon his knee. It put a little bit of fire in his belly, sent something warm to his brain. He brushed the top of Hannibal's hand in response, looking away whenever Hannibal caught his expression.

He couldn't stay over. He had no real excuse other than the fact that he needed to be at home, where wandering hands couldn't uncover any more of Will's secrets. To the home that held his dogs, who were both loyal and non-judgemental.

Still, Hannibal loaded him up with leftovers to take home with him, until he was called away by Tier, a murmured message about something that Will wasn't privy to. Will watched him leave and remembered how he looked Christmas morning looking out of the window, confessions of dead sisters and grief ringing in his ears.

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Hannibal mulled over the news of the departed city councilman with just the right shade of sympathy. The vote of no-confidence had gone through and there was a slot that needed filling. He sat with the president's aide in the lounge of an upmarket bar downtown, fingers curled around the single malt in his hand.

'Your ongoing support of the local arts and continued fundraising for Hopkins will put you in good stead. You're a man for the people, Hannibal. You're what's missing.'

'I hadn't considered it.' He lied because of course he *had.* It was the progression he needed. A natural next step for Hannibal and a delicious gaze into what the future could be. He would no longer have to whisper in the ear to garner influence, but lead from the forefront instead.

They shook hands on the way out, and he promised he would be in touch. He had much to think about, certain plans that he needed to put into place. There were a few things at home that needed sorting. Will needed dealing with. Matthew too. It would all come together eventually.

Hannibal arrived home to the scent of blood beneath the typical blend of perfumed alpha, liquor and sweat. General discontent spoke volumes over the hushed voices and the deliberate way his men were refusing to meet his eyes. He walked through the foyer, adjusting his cufflinks as he entered the formal sitting room, seeing both Matthew and Randall sitting together.

'It's alright,' Randall said, as he saw Hannibal approach. Sometimes the young man was an animal, wild and savage, other times he was the calmest man in the room. Tonight, it was the latter. Matthew was sitting beside him, pheromones sharp in the stuffy air, his eyes shining brightly.

‘I didn’t touch him. If he tells you I touched him he’s a liar.’ Matthew swirled his whiskey in his hand, looking to Hannibal. ‘I think he’s lost it a little. In the head. Maybe it *isn’t* normal for an omega to surround himself with so many alphas.’

‘Where is he?’ Hannibal asked, eyes sliding to Randall for a second. He watched Tier’s eyes dart to Hannibal’s left shoulder, to the door of Hannibal’s locked suite.

Hannibal found Will in his private study, perched on his desk. The scent of blood was stronger as he entered. Will was pinching the bridge of his nose, holding a crumpled tissue just underneath. He looked *awful* and his body was shaking lightly.

‘It’s just a nosebleed,’ Will said, carefully diffusing the wires Hannibal was crossing in his brain. The gushing had abated now. The tissue held to Will’s nose was caked with dried blood. Still, he tilted his neck obediently when Hannibal approached, sighing when hands moved to gently frame his face.

‘Why were you fighting?’

‘Jesus, you make it sound like junior high.’

‘I was unaware that you were prone to nosebleeds.’ There was no bruising around Will’s nose, although he looked awful. Pasty, sweat starting to build up at his temples, and his scent all wrong. It didn’t look as if he had been attacked.

‘I’m not normally,’ Will said, one of his hands coming up to wrap around Hannibal’s wrist. He pressed an open-mouthed kiss to the delicate skin and inhaled through his mouth. ‘He just looked at me and I lost it at him. Then my nose started bleeding. It was all blood and no fists, but I still don’t like having him around. I think he caught us fucking in the kitchen when we were away.’

‘Having him around is important if we want to keep an eye on Verger.’ Now more than ever, Hannibal needed things to be a little cleaner. If he was to take a place on the board of councilmen, then he needed his men disciplined and discreet.

‘You shouldn’t have set Abigail to it,’ Will said, and Hannibal smiled. He enjoyed the tenacity of Will, the stubbornness to not ever let a thing go. He stood with his knees pressed to the wood of his desk, Will’s legs dangling either side of him from his perch. Close enough to scent Will beneath his neutraliser.

‘I am fully aware of your feelings on the matter.’ He placed his hand on the nape of Will’s neck, bringing him in until his face was tucked to the crook of his neck. This close together, Will was truly enveloped in his scent. He was probably missing how it had been up at the lake. Hannibal missed him, missed a heated body beside him, Will’s gentle touch and his soft words and his distracting mouth.

They stood together, skin to skin contact, Will’s body slowly losing its stiffness, Hannibal’s mind clearing as well. As Will lay willingly against his throat, Hannibal discussed with him the conversation he’d had regarding the position opening up on the board of councillors.

‘Is that what you want?’ Will pulled back, fingers wrapped over Hannibal’s wrists. Hannibal enjoyed the pressure but not so much the shakiness. Will had calmed a lot since those early days. He was usually much more steady.

‘A natural next step.’

‘Perhaps. You’ll have to be careful. *We* have to be careful. Politicians play dirty, but not our type of dirty.’

‘Which is why I cannot have you causing a scene with Matthew. I need to nullify the threat Verger possesses. I can only do that if you keep your emotions in check.’ It was less about Will being an omega and more the about his general instability. He was a man used to jibes and comments about his status, he knew better than to cause a scene with Matthew as he had earlier.

‘I know.’ Will took one more large breath and then let it subside. The wired tautness of his body seemed to subside, although still entirely the wrong shade of pasty. ‘I should go.’

‘Must you? You look like you need the company.’ Hannibal would enjoy the company. He would send his men home and fix Will a stiff drink and then take him to bed. Not for sex, but for the intimacy Will was clearly in need of. Will was almost nodding before he caught himself and quickly shook his head.

‘No, I shouldn’t. I have stuff I need to do.’ A kiss to the corner of Hannibal’s lips, but then he was pushing at Hannibal, putting distance between them as he stood. He wavered for a moment and Hannibal held his hands out, to see whether he needed stabilising. Will’s eyes closed, he inhaled, and then took a step back before he left the room all together.

Alone in his office, and a little disappointed at Will’s hurried departure, Hannibal fixed himself a whiskey. He took a seat in his chair, breathing in what little of Will’s scent was in the room. There was something not quite right, ever since Will had told him of his son.

‘Would you like to talk about him?’

‘No, Hannibal. Please don’t. I can’t talk about him, I just wanted you to know. Please don’t go looking for him. Just leave him out of my life.’

Will had shut down any communication regarding his son no sooner had he spoken of him. Hannibal had done as was asked of him. He’d handed Will back the weathered photo of the little boy and not said a word about him after.

It had been a struggle hearing of Will’s previous pregnancy. Will hadn’t come to his bed as a virgin, he had enough experience to know what he enjoyed and what he didn’t and was vocal with it. But another alpha had put a child in him, and Will in all his teenage naïveté hadn’t thought of protecting himself. Had become a vessel for a child. He’d created a life. And it stung. All facets of Hannibal, not just his alpha side, burned red-hot with fury because another alpha had bred Will. Had filled him up with a pup. Had managed to do things to his body that Hannibal had failed. Hannibal took a large sip of his liquor, indulging himself in the burn that followed.

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Will had a phone call from Franklyn just as he was sitting in his office, picking at the skin beneath his nailbeds with a knife. He'd been so caught up in the impending bomb that he would be dropping on Hannibal that he had forgotten all about his concern with Ingram and the accounts. The distraction had his stomach flipping, had him almost losing balance as he dropped his knife to the desk and stood too quickly.

Will left the office just as the crowds started to pump in, struggling his way through too many bodies, down the balcony and across the street to Franklyn's apartment. Franklyn opened the door wearing a thick knitted sweater, matted down the front with a stain. When he caught Will looking, he pressed his hand to his chest hiding it awkwardly.

'So the salary you pay the accountancy firm is fine. The same every month and it matches what was specified in the original contract.' Franklyn pointed a squat finger at the account number and Will nodded as they stood over his computer screen.

'He can't change what Hannibal pays him,' Will looked for Franklyn for confirmation, looking back at the screen once he nodded.

'But I noticed some outgoings that you don't seem to have any paperwork for. Subcontracting is fine, but you don't have any paperwork that suggest you knew about it. Were you not aware?'

Hannibal hired accountants so that employees like Will *wouldn't* have to be aware. He didn't point this out. 'Ingram's subcontracting?'

'Hmmm, he probably has it all signed off, but I checked the account it's going into and it was a bit encrypted. I mean… a *lot* encrypted. I followed the trace several times, but I'm good, you know Will—'

Will placed a hand on Franklyn's shoulder. 'I know you're good at this. It's why I came to you.'

'Right. Yes.' Franklyn's chest swelled, whether from a compliment from an omega or a friend, Will wasn't sure. 'See the money all ends up in the same place, so he isn't subcontracting at all.'

Will wasn't surprised by the findings. Ingram was arrogant enough to think he could steal from someone like Hannibal and believe that someone like Will would be too stupid, *too omega,* to realise what he was doing. Probably thought Will would swoon over the hood of his brand new car.

'If you knew what was good for you, would you embezzle money from Hannibal Lecter?' Will asked, sitting on the news. He was relieved that he'd been on to something, even with how scattered his mind was at the moment. He thought of every sly comment Ingram ever said to him, every jab in his direction, and the revelation warmed his chest. Will loved righteous justice and being the one to dish it out. He was *good* at it.

‘No. I probably wouldn’t.’ Franklyn’s nervous laughter forced a smile from Will. He took a seat beside Franklyn, allowing himself to breathe in the warm scent. His heartrate slowed a little. ‘What are you going to do about it?’

‘Tell Hannibal, I guess.’ Will looked at the other man, watching him nod his head. They didn’t know a thing about each other, not really. Will found it comforting enough to open his mouth and reveal his own truth. ‘I’m pregnant.’

‘Oh. But you’re not-’ Franklyn’s eyes slide from Will’s bare neck to his hands, free of a ring.

‘No, I’m not.’

‘People don’t care so much these days. Do they? I don’t think they do. I don’t care. It’s good news, unless it isn’t. Is it good news, Will?’ Concern etched on Franklyn’s features, but he shuffled closed to Will on the sofa, his scent suddenly stronger. It was a comfort rather than anything else. Not like Hannibal, nothing felt as good as he did, but Franklyn felt safe. No threat.

‘Yeah, it’s good news. I just wanted to tell the one person that would congratulate me.’ Franklyn’s hand flew out before Will could stop him. He didn’t like being touched, but Franklyn was harmless and starved of affection and he had just helped Will decipher Ingram’s deception. His hand splayed over Will’s shirt, fingers warm to the touch. Will’s palms itched, but he was calmed by the smoothing out of Franklyn’s worried features.

‘You won’t tell Hannibal that I found this out, will you?’ Franklyn’s hand dropped from Will’s stomach, his face taking on the nervous stiffness again. ‘I don’t want to get involved in anything dangerous.’

‘Does it worry you?’

‘I know who he is. I’m a fool, Will, but not that much. Please. *Please* keep my name out of it.’ Franklyn swallowed so thickly that Will almost heard it echo around the room. A burst of nervous laughter escaped Franklyn’s lips, cutting through the thick atmosphere that had fallen over them.

‘Of course.’ Will smiled tight. ‘He won’t know your name.’

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The first time Will saw Alana after the holidays was back at his house. A Sunday morning. He’d been up early because he *hadn’t* slept in the first place. But the dogs were walked and flopping lazily across the warm floorboards in front of the heater. Will had coffee waiting for Alana as she entered, drinking a weak tea himself.

‘I know I got too close,’ Will started to say. She had taken his blood pressure and launched into a typical tirade regarding his health. He didn’t inform her of the nosebleed the previous night, or the fact that he had had another one a few days before. Or the dizzy spells, or the constant panic. Or the lack of sleep – though he was certain it showed up in the sleep bruises beneath his eyes. ‘I got too close and now when I’m not around him I feel it. I really feel it.’

‘If I’d have known that you were planning to spend Christmas together, I would have advised you against it,’ she said. Alana was so soft, her tone gentle even when he knew that she was mad at him. She drank her coffee, one hand dropping down to pat Winston’s head where it lolled against her thigh.

‘It was nice being with him. I liked pretending that it could be something else. I don’t think my body even knew what relaxation was until I was with him.’ Will looked down at his t-shirt, fingers light against his stomach. He had felt bloated for three days now, wasn’t sure the sensation was going to go away any time soon. ‘Now I’m back to reality and facing the consequences.’

‘You’re seeking a bond,’ Alana said, confirming what he already knew, what they had spoken about on the phone when he had called her, lovestruck and panicked.

‘It was just nice not having to care for a little while.’ He covered his face with his hands and huffed a breath. ‘I told him about my son. I could tell him about my other kid but not this one.’

‘How did he take the news?’

‘He just took it and then I said I didn’t want to speak about it again so we didn’t.’ Will slipped into the memory. He burned with the shame in how he had admitted to Hannibal how *weak* he had been. How he had been foolish enough to be tricked, how he had let them take his son and how now he was so fucked up that he never wanted to see the kid again. To protect the kid from the utter mess Will was.

‘There are other omegas in your position,’ Alana said softly. ‘Unbonded. Pregnant. I could put you in contact with a support group.’

Will laughed, not at Alana, or at least not entirely. But the idea that she thought he would thrive in that type of environment. Talking to people that thought they were like him. Sad unbonded omegas, trying to prepare to raise a baby that they so desperately wanted to do with an alpha.

‘I’m good, thanks,’ he told her. She knew him well enough now to know when to change the subject. Instead she told him that now he was officially past twelve weeks and things were relatively *okay* he might like to start thinking about how he wanted to set things up at home.

‘A baby needs furniture, Will,’ she said, with enough grace not to look around his sparsely decorated house as she did so. ‘A crib. A car seat. A stroller.’ Will had a vision of his baby asleep in the back of his car as he took out a traitor for Hannibal. Had another one of Hannibal with some archaic Victorian style stroller, putting the baby to sleep with his endless opera. It almost made a smile curl onto his lips at the absurdity.

‘I’ll add it to the list,’ he said, ignoring her gaze when it fell softly on him again.

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Abigail was bored out of her mind. She thought working for Hannibal would be different, that she'd get to be like Will, who had the job in the club, but the other one too. She wanted to peel from the shadows. To be ready at the drop of a phone call. To be an omega is to be needed. She wanted to be needed.

What she didn't want was to be standing on the gloss white floor of the art gallery, tiny daggers pressing into the soles of her feet from the high-heeled shoes. The skirt was tight and expensive, and she wore her hair up. All the women wore their hair up around here. She needed to fit in. Matthew had laughed the first time he had seen her like this. Kissed the side of her mouth, his eyes always wandering, like he was looking for someone else.

But it was boring. It was sitting on the front desk answering emails, or the phone, or pretending to appreciate art in more than just a 'this is paint' kind of way. There was a new exhibition starting soon, some artist from New York that she hadn't heard of. She was supposed to be liaising for him on behalf of the gallery, making sure his art all arrived in one piece. She was bored out of her mind as she sent *another* email.

One perk to a chilly Friday afternoon, twenty minutes before she was finished for the day, was seeing Will staring up at the large artwork hanging to the left of the entrance. In the white of the room he stood out in his dark coat and scarf, his hands tucked into his pockets, like a fully realised shadow. Abigail walked out of the office, her heels clipping on the surface until she was beside him.

'This one is way out of your budget,' she told him, smiling when he looked over at her. With the heels that pinched her feet, they were the same height. He looked tired. He looked so much worse than he had when they had all been tucked up in Hannibal's lake house.

'You treat all your customers like this?' he asked, but there was the sideways smile catching at the corner of his lips that brought a mirrored one out of her too.

'Only the ones that I know can't afford this shit.' She looked at the picture. It was a watercolour landscape, somewhere rural. Tanned crooked houses in the distance and a run of purple vines painted intricately. It didn't look like any where she had ever been. 'Have you ever been to Europe?'

Will shook his head, staring back at the painting some more. He looked a little bit like he wanted to push his forehead to the paint and fall into the world that existed on the canvas.

'Hannibal says he wants to take me next year. He's got a villa in southern Italy.'

'Of course he does,' Will laughed, looking over her shoulder at the clock on the wall. She scanned his eyes as he looked at it. 'When do you get off? I thought we could get a coffee.'

'Can we get pizza instead?' she asked, looking over her shoulder when she saw her office manager stroll past. Abigail thought she was kind of a bitch, but she was *mostly* doing her job. But she wouldn't yell at Abigail with Will around. He gave her a quick nod and a bemused look when she said she could leave early. She told her manager that Hannibal had sent Will to fetch her and there was no argument. Everyone was too frightened of Hannibal to question it. A lot of people feared Will too.

There was a pizza place three blocks from the art gallery, on the corner where bougie met not-quite gentrified and this greasy chain hadn't yet been bought out by anyone like Hannibal. She felt like a kid again, when her parents would take her into the city for the day and they'd finish up somewhere similar.

Abigail picked what they had; he wasn't fussy. In here, among strangers, Will wasn't granted a second glance – no more than anyone else – but she thought to how the alphas that circled Hannibal at home, how they always gave Will space. She thought about how her manager hadn't argued when Abigail said Will was there to pick her up early from work. She thought about how Matthew's eyes still sought Will out when they were in the same room together.

'People respect you,' she informed him, as he dragged his finger through the condensation on his glass of lemonade.

His eyes darted over to her, a sad sort of smile on his face. 'People don't respect me. They're just too scared of Hannibal to voice their actual opinions. There's a difference.'

'Because he respects you.'

'Pathetic isn't it?' He stopped talking as their pizza dropped down onto the table. It was a slick greasy thing, topped with sausage, peppers and mushrooms. Hannibal would hate it. 'Alphas are whole without anyone else.'

'You've lost me?' she tried to follow his train of thought as she grabbed a soggy slice, fingers curling under the grease-laden wedge.

'We're just an alpha's spare rib. They can function without us, but we're just there waiting to be snapped into place. We're just around to make up the bigger picture.'

'Sounds like some weird indoctrination,' Abigail told him, but she felt guilt. It *was* different for her. Female omegas were more common, there wasn't a lot of between them and their beta counterparts. Still treated like *shit* but not sanctified in the way male omegas were, with their rarity and supposed beauty. Will would probably be considered beautiful if he didn't look so damn exhausted all the time. 'You guys are on pedestals none of us can reach.'

A tight smile was his response. Almost curt. She'd seen it on him plenty of times before. 'When we meet someone and bond with them it's different. It's for life.'

'It's a soul thing,' she agreed.

'I know it goes both ways. Alphas feel things too, but I can't help but feel we get the raw end of the deal. They want to protect, but they don't miss us physically. They can cope with separation. We just get hysterical. Apparently.'

'I can't imagine you hysterical,' she said. 'I know Hannibal helps you with that issue. I know you don't like talking about it, but it was nice seeing you happy at Christmas. You were both…different.' They'd slept in the same bed the whole time they were away; she saw them kissing in the kitchen, saw how Hannibal watched Will when his mind was elsewhere.

‘It’s supposed to just be a physical thing. We had an agreement, neither of us wanted anything else.’ Sex with Hannibal. Fucking someone to get those hormone levels to drop down wasn't exactly unusual. She knew how it went; she knew how the rape cases went too.

‘If I wasn’t on suppressants, I’d have to do the same. Find someone to fuck it out with.’ She raised her eyebrow at him. She could get crooked with him. She was probably higher than him in the pecking order; or at least dogpiled in with the beta women on enough occasions that she didn’t feel so otherly. ‘I don’t feel any different on them.’

She’d been relieved. Hannibal had signed off on her going on them. She was on a low dose, just enough to stop her heats coming. But it was almost exciting; made her feel grown up. Making choices like Will did.

‘Just don’t hang around with so many unmated alphas. It’s the pheromones. It’s just chemicals,’ Will said. ‘Don’t make the mistakes I did and you’ll do just fine.’

They talked as the pizza reduced in sections, as she elevated her sore feet and noticed how out of place they were in the diner. Surrounded by kids and adults in jeans and hoodies. The two of them in their professional suits, her heels balanced on the booth beside her.

‘I hate working in the art gallery. It’s boring. Do you like the club?’ she leaned forward, plucking extra mushrooms from her slice and dumping them back onto the pizza between them. He gave her a look that crinkled his forehead, but he didn’t stop her doing it again.

‘I don’t mind it. I like the routine.’

‘I’d like to boss some alphas around,’ she said, thinking to the ones that she knew hung around the club. Will ran a legit business, she’d heard Hannibal talk about how clean it was. Any member of staff caught tampering, caught dealing, Will would kick them out on their ass. He tore into her the one time he caught her underaged and flirting with the barman last spring. Fired the barman too. ‘Do you like it more than being a cop?’

‘I hated every second of being a cop.’ His eyes were down on his plate, on his picked and plucked at pizza. When he looked up at her, her stomach flipped at the intensity. ‘I haven’t broached the subject of you and Matthew, but I want you to know that I’m not happy about it.’

‘You know I’m doing it because Hannibal asked me to.’ She’d been surprised he’d kept quiet about it this long. She knew Will well enough to know that he tended to let his feelings hang out a lot more than most. He’d been pissed, but he hadn’t said a word about it.

‘Yes, I’m aware.’

‘He knows about you and Hannibal. I mean, you guys were *pretty obvious* when we were away together. He doesn’t understand why Hannibal won’t bond with you. He thinks it comes from Hannibal, but we all know the only thing stopping the bond is you.’

‘What did you say to that?’

‘He doesn’t like that you’ve slept with Hannibal. I mean he *really* doesn’t like it.’ She remembered how furious he had looked that first night. He’d seen them in the kitchen going at it. She was kind of half disappointed, half horrified.

‘Don’t say that.’

‘You’re not my father, Will. You’re not even my fake dad so we don’t have to have this conversation.’

‘I know,’ he said eventually. There was no heat in the words. He just sat back, slouching in the plastic booth opposite her. ‘You can call me if you need anything. If anything happens, just let me know. If he ever touches you…you know I’ll destroy him.’

‘I know,’ she said, smiling. She wouldn’t mind Matthew causing a little bit of damage, if only to see Will’s reaction first hand.

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Will had debated what to do about sitting on the information regarding Ingram. He could feel the pressure sitting over him. He took his medication, washed them down with a bottle of water at his desk. His body felt so tense, he could feel every muscle shaking. Abigail was worrying him with her sheer apathy. He was tired, barely sleeping because his panic refused to abate even when he was shattered. The only time he felt a sense of calm was in the presence of Hannibal, but he’d had to cut it out, had to stay only when it was polite and not invite himself into his locked suite like he was so prone to doing. He could feel the wires in his body knotting up, could feel the blood pumping. No amount of shoving his head between his knees was helping his situation.

There was the usual amount of bustle that came with a late evening trip to Hannibal’s. Too many alphas standing around, drinking whiskey that was worth more than their monthly salaries. He caught Matthew’s eye as he brushed past, noticing but ignoring the typical flare and flutter of nostrils as he passed through the room. They hadn’t spoken since their last interaction.

Will rapped knuckled on the closed door to Hannibal’s work office, a broad room at the back of the house. He was sitting behind his large desk, sketching in his shirt sleeves and waistcoat. There was a pull behind Will’s navel, trying to force him as close as possible. He blinked it away as he took a seat opposite, exhaling deeply.

‘Hi,’ he said eventually, watching a soft smile form on Hannibal’s mouth before he looked down at his work again. No one else got that. They got the arrogant smirk, twisted up in confusing words that only Will was quick enough to decipher.

‘Will. What a pleasant surprise.’

‘It’s about Ingram.’

Hannibal’s eyes shot up to meet him. ‘I recall you being disappointed that he bought a new car.’

'Disappointed? No. I was concerned. Look, I had someone look at the books.'

The brief narrowing of eyes before they opened again. 'Why didn't you come to me with this?'

'I am now.' Will blinked, skirting his eyes away from Hannibal. Instead he stared down at the thick paper in front of him. Hannibal's fascination sat more with portraiture, but Will enjoyed landscapes. Mostly because he liked to imagine himself far away from reality most of the time.

'I presume the alpha I've smelled on you recently is the one you've had oversee the account.' The comment had Will blinking out of his thoughts. His looked to Hannibal and noticed the haze of anger behind his eyes. He curled his fingers inwards, nails biting into palm. Hannibal was jealous and Will had the urge to soothe it away, whine beneath his breath and show his neck. He swallowed it down and focused on the anger. Will understood that a lot better.

'I needed someone that I trusted who wasn't involved with you,' Will said, flattening his palms to the desk. This office wasn't like the one in his private suite, with the walls of books and the heavy leather chairs and the memories of kisses, of intimate touches. 'He's not a threat to you. He's not. He's barely an alpha.'

'His scent is a little off,' Hannibal agreed. His chair made a satisfying sigh as he sat back in it, fingers curling over the arms. Will looked down at his slim fingers rather than at his face. 'What were the findings?'

'It looks like he's subcontracting but all the money pools into the same account. Embezzling, basically,' Will said, remembering only half of what Franklyn had told him and hoping that that was enough.

'Thank you, Will.' Will looked at Hannibal, right in the eye because he could; because he had been trained to do so. His reaction wasn't right. He sounded cool, unsurprised, and as if Will had simply informed him of tomorrow's weather forecast.

'Thank you? What are you going to do about it? He's stealing from my business.'

'*My* business, darling.'

'Sure, but it's the cleanest one you own and that's down to *me.'* His fingers curled in on the desk. He allowed the fury to burn, to flush his cheeks with a vivid pink. 'I'm not going to sit back while you get your *big alphas* to look over it.'

'I see.' Hannibal's chin tilted upwards, shadows falling stark over the high plans of his angled face. He could feel it between them. The tension tugging. His stupid omega brain desperate to be overwhelmed had him inching close, bringing in the scent of Hannibal, knowing that it was the only thing that could calm him.

'What do you see?'

‘You wish for me to go on your word alone, to damage a relationship with an accountant that has nothing but stellar reviews before he came to me because an unverified alpha has found something wrong with the books.’

‘You’ve gone along on my word before,’ Will said not rising to it. He remembered his blood pressure, remembered all those scaremongering tactics that Alana has espoused at him, pre-eclampsia, bleeding. Traumatic birth. He wouldn’t have any of those things if he could just calm himself the fuck down. He bit the inside of his cheek until blood bloomed and then plugged the wound with his tongue.

‘I’m not saying that I don’t believe you,’

‘Sounds exactly like what you’re saying.’

‘Your relationship with Mr Ingram is testy at best. I’d rather not be led into a lion’s den on the word of someone who by all means is considered a lamb.’ Hannibal’s words filled the room. Will imagined them fully formed and sitting between them, a clear typeface as they left Hannibal’s lips and entered Will’s ears. They flashed behind his eyes as he tried to contain himself. Hannibal was his boss, but he wasn’t his alpha, and Will could handle things himself.

‘Go fuck yourself, Hannibal.’ There was the cloying feeling of nausea rising from his throat, but he swallowed it down, even as the room span. He left in a clumsy clatter, twisting away from the hands that flew out to steady him as he pulled open the door. Tier stepped back when Will pushed him away; tall and young and unmated in all his alpha glory. His scent made Will gag more, but he stumbled away before he could retch in front of him.

As Will departed, Hannibal sat back, tongue poking between his lips, breathing in Will’s scent. He was ill. Something sharp in his blood, and his heart was hammering too quick in his chest; a bird pecking to be freed. There’d been an element of it before the holidays. He’d hoped some time away at the lake house would free Will’s mind from whatever had been bothering him. It had worked; Will was more settled than he had ever been. Hannibal rarely coaxed more than he considered necessary. Will rarely needed coaxing these days, they were so in sync. Wills pheromones responded to Hannibal, soothing anything violent. And the things he had confessed had bought clarity to the shaded depths of his past. The child he’d had snatched in the hospital, diving into a career that chained him to a dependency on suppressants. Freeing his mind had only undone some of the damage.

Will hadn’t visited his bedroom since they had come back. Sex had always been a part of the arrangement before the inclusion of feelings. It helped bring Will down when his body buzzed; his brain fried from all the alpha pheromones. It helped Hannibal too. The scent of Will’s body, the fit of his body against his own calmed down any need of a rut.

He was omega, and that meant his blood pressure was on the higher end of the scale. Nothing new. He usually took medication for it, and Hannibal had seen the tiny plastic bottle in the pocket of his coat. He wasn’t feverish, but he wasn’t thinking straight either. He was twitchy. Will twitchy and not thinking straight wasn’t good for business, and if he was avoiding

Hannibal's touch to calm himself down, then there was little Hannibal could do but watch him burn himself back into reality.

Will worked too hard. He ran a hard ship at the club, but they would work well enough without him, for a few days at least. He could go spend time with Abigail, or his dogs. Go fishing. Maybe it wouldn't be out of place for Hannibal to seek him out, to find him in that little white farmhouse so they could talk things through. He had, in the past, manipulated Will to get him to where he needed to, but he was too smart to be crossed like that now. Hannibal needed to be cautious.

He didn't enjoy the scent of another alpha – an unknown alpha – clinging to Will's clothes; rum and sweat and something a little bitter, but he took Will's word for it. He still had no real claim on Will, no matter what had happened over Christmas. The soft hands and the gentle smile had faded from reality, but they lived on in his mind, and he was certain he'd grab a hold of them again at some point.

Hannibal sent Tier after Will, told him to keep his distance, to keep his guard up and protect Will if he needed to. From what, he didn't specify. Best to keep all plans to himself for the time being. He closed the door when Tier left and sat back down behind his desk. Three deep breaths, and then looked down at his sketch. He picked his pencil up, freshly sharpened, enough so that the nib stung when he pressed it to the pad of his thumb. He smiled, hummed softly, and pressed it down to the page again.

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Ingram wasn't hard to find. Will knew where he lived, and through his recent obsession, knew which bars he enjoyed falling out of. He parked up and waited. His heart wouldn't stop racing. Usually his only sense of freedom came when he was hurting someone that deserved it. Will didn't like leaving them pretty. Normally he had back up; a team that would oversee the clean up once Will had finished. He didn't have that now. He'd just have to make do. He'd figure it out later.

'Will Graham, you are so uptight I can't imagine how good that pussy feels.' Ingram's nostrils flared as he took in the sight of Will, his mouth peeling open, tongue squeaking against teeth as he started to speak. He was taller, but inebriated.

'Get in the fucking car,' Will said, stepping close. Will didn't particularly enjoy guns, but they were good as a threat. As he put a hand on Ingram's shoulder, he slid his gun so it pressed up against Ingram's ribs. 'We're going to have a fucking chat.'

Ingram did as he was told, stumbling into the passenger side of Will's car. He half regretted it, having an alpha reeking of booze in his car. He could taste the sour tang of fear on his scent and that usually made pleasure curl deep inside Will's chest. An omega putting the fear of God into an alpha. Didn't happen too often in life.

Will drove until they were out of the city, until they hit more trees than anything else. No cameras. No eyewitnesses. As he pulled up to a stop on the side of the road, Ingram stumbled from the car, but he couldn't run. Will had good aim. He was feral when he wanted. And he was furious.

‘You think you can fuck me over?’

‘It really wasn’t personal.’ Ingram’s hands raised, more as if he wanted to placate than surrender. Will heard the rumbling of a car engine not too far off, but he shook the thought away. It was just his mind playing tricks on him. He could hear his heart beating in his chest, could feel panic trying to seize. Made it hard to focus. ‘So what if I was taking an extra cut? You’re not the easiest client. Being spoken down to by someone like you. Walking around as if it doesn’t take a knot between your legs to calm you down.’

‘You offering yours?’ Will asked, slipping in the fury. ‘Maybe I’ll shoot it off.’

'Will, you’re feeling emotional right now.’ Lips peeling to reveal a smirk. ‘I know how Hannibal works. He doesn’t kill in the middle of a forest. He certainly doesn’t kill accountants that were just *doing their job.* This is why omegas shouldn’t be in roles like yours. Too emotional.’

‘Shut up.’ The gun rattled in his hands, fingers sliding as he adjusted his grip. He was an animal that worked on instinct; Hannibal had revealed his instincts to him, but his brain felt trapped in a vice and he couldn’t slow the beating of his damn heart. ‘Embezzling isn’t doing your job.’

‘Death by gunshot isn’t humiliating enough. He likes to strip people down to their core. He likes to take what they have and wear it better. You really haven’t thought this through.’

‘You’re here on my terms,’ Will said, cocking the gun because he could, because he liked to see how Ingram finally flinched. Then he suddenly dropped down to his knees. Will frowned, the submission seemed off, even as Will flicked the safety off. For show, mainly. His thoughts were shuffling over and over. He caught Ingram’s eyes flicking over Will’s shoulder and he heard footsteps now, finally over the sound of his own heart racing.

The scent was familiar, he realised, when he finally breathed deep enough to scent it. *Tier*. He felt a hand close over his mouth and something hard hit him on the back of the head before his vision shuttered to darkness.

Will awoke in a hospital bed. He could tell by the plasticky feel of the gurney beneath his back; the white wash of the walls. He licked his lips as he acclimatised to his surroundings. He remembered Ingram. Remembered the scent of Tier in the back of his throat and something heavy hitting him.

‘You’re back with us, Graham.’ Will recognised the voice though he couldn’t place it at first. His hand moved, to touch the back of his head, hissing when his fingers slipped against freshly stitched scalp. ‘We had to stitch you back up again.’

‘Oh fuck.’ Sutcliffe was a fine enough doctor under normal circumstances, only Will had never met him under normal circumstances. He belonged to Hannibal, was used when Hannibal needed someone off-the-books. And if he knew Will’s secrets, then they would belong to Hannibal. ‘I sure hope you didn’t fucking tell him.’

A nervous swallow. Sutcliffe knew exactly what Will was talking about which meant he had run tests. He looked down at his arm. He was in his shirt sleeves, his left sleeve rolled up. A needle-prick bruise standing out against his pale skin.

‘You must start taking better care of yourself, Mr Graham. Your blood pressure is unreasonably high.’

‘Not unreasonably considering the circumstances.’ Will looked away, over at the blank wall; at the uneven posters that lined the walls. ‘Is everything fine with the baby?’

Another hesitation, before he continued, ‘fetus seems on the small side but otherwise.’

‘So I can go.’ Will swung his legs down, shirking off the steadying hand. He didn’t need that. *He didn’t need that.* He was fine on his own.

‘Unmated omegas that are used to the touch of an alpha can often develop a perceived bond.’ Sutcliffe’s words were perhaps a warning more than anything else, but Will still took offence. ‘It’s why you’re struggling so much.’

‘You’re not my goddamn therapist,’ he reminded Sutcliffe. Any dealings with Hannibal’s doctors were strictly *off-record.* They didn’t have access to his medical records. He was thankful that Dr Bloom would have no knowledge of this. ‘Can I go?’

‘Hannibal wants to speak with you. He’s outside.’ Sutcliffe left in such a hurry that Will could only imagine Hannibal’s mood. Will greedily sucked in a breath, wetting his lips and looking away as the door closed with a click. Hannibal stood before him. Hair slicked back, black coat, black gloved hands. He looked the best type of dangerous. The type that had Will’s heart fluttering higher, even as his stomach flipped over and over.

‘I’m not entirely sure what you planned to achieve regarding your actions with Ingram.’ Hannibal took a seat beside Will, mask expertly covering his true feelings. Will tried to focus, tried to see for the cracks beneath it. ‘What was the plan, Will?’

‘I didn’t exactly have a plan. You weren’t listening to me. You didn’t listen and I didn’t want to be fucked over.’

‘I don’t handle business with a gun in the backwoods,’ Hannibal reminded Will. There was the usual composure in his stance, but it had slipped slightly. There was a swelling in his eyes, a flush on his cheeks. Will could feel his body trying to take over his brain, to get him to plead and soothe. His fingers twisted on the slippery gurney either side of him.

‘Is he dead?’

‘Tier dealt with him off after he put you out.’ *Put you out.* Will’s fists curled up into tight balls, knuckles straining. ‘We have other things to discuss now. Something that seemed to have evaded your mind.’

‘I hope you’re not going to ask me whose it is,’ Will said when he couldn’t bear the silence any longer. ‘You don’t get to ask me that.’

‘I need not enquire as to who the father is,’ Hannibal said quietly. He suddenly stood up as if he hadn't quite decided how he wanted to place himself. ‘I do have to wonder why nothing has been said beforehand. I presume you have known sometime. How far along are you?’

'14 Weeks. It was uh the night with Verger.’ Will paused, expecting Hannibal to say something, but his face was blank. The placidity just made the panic catch even higher in Will’s throat. He pulled at his hair, tugging until it ached. ‘I don’t need to explain my actions to anyone, and I don’t need to talk to you about it.’

‘The child is my—’

‘The child is *mine.* No one can take this one from me. Not you, and not anyone. I don’t want anything from you, Hannibal. I just want you to leave me the hell alone.’ He stood with little grace, ignoring how the room span for a few seconds.

‘How many more children will you bear unbonded?’

‘Ah fuck you.’ Will’s stomach churned, rage and humiliation festering at Hannibal’s words. He paced the room, hands rubbing over his face. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. This wasn’t how he was planning it to go.

‘I believe I deserve the right to—'

‘Unbonded you have no rights. Nothing to claim. You don’t even have to say it’s yours. I don’t *want* you to say it’s yours because it’s mine. It belongs to me. No one is taking this one from me.’

‘Your body is seeking a mate to claim the child.’

‘Well the mind and body are two separate things. I follow my mind. *Always.* I won’t be drawn into anything else.’ There was silence, even as Will’s palms itched to reach out. As his heart pumped, as his head ached, from the wound and from the panic.

Hannibal rose to his full height. Will couldn’t draw his eyes to him, couldn’t bear to look him in the eye. He was angry. Will knew Hannibal’s anger, but he was usually the one to soothe it, rarely the cause.

‘You may continue your work at the club.’

‘May I?’ Will spat back before he thought it through. He rubbed a shaking hand over his mouth, caught between pushing Hannibal away or trying to calm him down.

‘I don’t want to see you at the house. I don’t want to see you around Abigail.’

‘That’s it?’

‘No, Will. This is far from *it.’* That was more like it. Will flinched, but he didn’t pull away when he felt Hannibal’s leather-clad fingers wrap tighter around his wrist. His scent and his touch was always so soothing, but now there was a threat. His other hand gripped Will’s jaw,

tight at first and then it softened. Will felt himself shaking, and Hannibal did too. He loosened his grip and stepped away. ‘I don’t wish to cause you harm. Not yet.’

‘But you will eventually?’ Will said, finally able to catch Hannibal’s eye. The mask had slipped completely. A red flush over his cheeks, his eyes almost wet. Will couldn’t think of a time he’d looked more vulnerable. Maybe that early morning confession of his dead sister. ‘You didn’t see this coming at all, did you?’

‘I will have my driver take you home,’ Hannibal said. Will watched him inhale deeply, composure reforming as he gathered his words about him. Will stood with a palm on the bed, unable to bring himself to look Hannibal in the eye as the other man continued. ‘Do *not* come back to Baltimore. I could hurt you. I could hurt *both* of you. Don’t think that I am above such horrors.’

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Everyone has been so kind about this...thank you so much :)

Will was cooking dinner when the chaos of his dogs barking hysterically at the door had him curious. He turned the sauce down to a low simmer, wiping his hands on a dishcloth before moving to the front of the house to see who had arrived. The only visitor he ever had was Alana, and that was always during their scheduled sessions.

Abigail was stumbling out of her Jeep by the time he opened his screen door. He looked to her wearily, eyeing the small bag she had in her hand. Still, he stood back as she thundered through. She tossed her bag into the corner of the room, bumping into one of the dog beds scattered across the floor.

‘It’s too much in that house. I don’t know what you’re fighting about, but can’t you just come back? He’s so different without you around.’

‘You could go back to college if it’s that bad,’ Will said, closing the door when the last of his dogs came barrelling through. He walked back through into the kitchen, past Abigail, to attend to the stove. ‘Finish your education.’

‘You seemed happy at Christmas. Both of you.’ She was a kid. He was always reminding her of that, but right now he saw it gleaming in the vulnerability of her words.

‘I was.’ He turned to watch her tug her boots off, her coat and hat following as they were thrown onto the coat stand by the door. She took a seat at the table, the dogs following her in the excitable buzz of having someone new in the house.

‘Why are you so resistant to being happy?’ she asked plainly. ‘I’m happy and I live with the man that killed my father.’

‘Killing your dad stopped you from being slaughtered.’ He’d not really made enough food for two people, but he split the pasta between two bowls and grabbed a fork for Abigail, placing it down in front of her before he took a seat opposite.

‘You’re always so righteous about it. Doesn’t make it any easier,’ she said. He watched her twirl spaghetti around her fork, gliding through tomatoes as the bobbin of pasta thickened. ‘Hannibal’s way more reckless when you’re not around. I don’t think your relationship would be that…you know… unequal.’

‘It’s not just that.’ He could tell her, he thought. Tell her about the baby, but then what? She would be even more confused about why he wouldn’t bond with Hannibal. He’d have to tell

her about Felix and he wouldn't *couldn't* expunge his grief on anyone else. 'Does he know you're here?'

'Like he cares.' Will swallowed his mouthful and looked at her. 'Matthew seems delighted. He's probably pissed on all the trees outside, waiting to make a move. Marking his territory.'

Will stared at the stillness of her open face, the way her tone wasn't bitter at all. 'You finished toying with him?'

'You should bond with Hannibal just to piss him off. He's obsessed with you.' Will recalled the moment he caught Matthew smirking, tasting his fingers after swiping them over the counter.

'Why does he work for him if he hates him so much?' Will was desperate for some perspective on it. Maybe less about Matthew, maybe more Hannibal and why he kept him around. 'Do you know what happened a couple of months back?'

'The Verger creep tried to bond you with a fake heat?' she leaned forward, pointy elbow sliding in his direction, as her eyes lit up. 'What did it feel like when you killed his man? Matthew said it was with your bare teeth and that you were already in heat. I don't want to do anything but lay there when I'm in heat.'

Will ignored the last part. 'Only a handful of people knew my movements that night. Someone tipped Verger off.'

'You think it was Matthew?'

'We know it was him. Hannibal is playing a long game with him and you can't get hurt.' He reached a hand out and placed it on top of hers. 'You're too important to get hurt.'

'You get soppy when you're sad,' she said, but her face had flushed. 'Why are you so sad, Will?'

'Eat your dinner. I'll drive you to work in the morning.'

The next morning he roused Abigail from his couch with coffee that clearly wasn't up to the standard she was used to at Hannibal's. She poured enough sugar to make him grit his teeth, but he said nothing as he fed the dogs.

'What are you going to do for work? I know you're still working the club, but you can't continue, surely?' she said to him, lips curling with every sip of coffee. He leaned back against his sink and sighed. 'Maybe if you went back on the suppressants, but most aren't as lenient as Hannibal. I know that from my course at college.'

'Yeah, when are you heading back to college? You were supposed to restart after the holidays.'

‘I’m taking a sabbatical. Ooh, I know. You could be a private investigator. You’d be good at that. And you wouldn’t have to work for anyone.’ She drained her coffee and left it on the table, leaning down to stroke Buster as he puttered by.

‘Are you ready? You’re going to be late.’

‘Will. You could just suck it up for once in your life. You don’t have to fight everything,’ she said to him as he pulled up outside the gallery. She wasn’t dressed for work, just a smudge of Vaseline over her lips and her hair finger brushed to straightness. Not exactly professional, but Will didn’t have the stamina to remind her of Hannibal’s standards.

‘If I don’t fight then I’d give in,’ he said, surprised at his own honesty. ‘You shouldn’t come and see me again. Not at my place.’

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‘It’s stupid. It’s my one indulgence.’ Will was standing over a small cardboard box as Alana drank her coffee on the sofa, the dogs calm and asleep across their beds. He usually kept it locked up and hidden behind his dad’s old gear in the barn, but once a year he would bring it in and add to the pile. ‘I never let thoughts linger too much, but I do this and I think about him.’

‘Gifts for your son.’

‘One every birthday.’ A rattle for when he turned one. The hardest one, still too fresh. Two – he never had any money when he was seventeen, so he’d wrapped up his soft teddy bear that he’d carried everywhere as a toddler. His mom had left him with it when she’d left as a baby. It was easier when he was a kid, he would walk slowly through the large shelves at various toyshops; picking up dinosaurs, light up trucks, soft-pellet guns, wondering what he would be into. Fly fishing gear when he was thirteen; an iPhone when he was fourteen; outdated now and wrapped in red paper that was peeling at the sides.

‘What would you buy this time?’ she asked him, leaning forward to see inside. It was like secret Santa, all different shapes and sizes, all meticulously wrapped.

‘When Abigail turned seventeen, I paid for her driving course,’ Will said. ‘He probably drives already. I don’t know.’

‘You relate him to Abigail a lot.’

‘I know.’ He never forgot the fact that she was his therapist and not a friend, comments like that made him all too aware. He sat back, sought comfort in the dogs laying calmly around him. ‘Every milestone of hers reminds me of one that I’ve missed of his. At the same time I feel close to him *through* her, like I don’t know. Like I could help him somehow by helping her.’

‘Omegas thrive on caring for others.’ Will shot her a warning look, one that she levelled back just as strong until he looked away.

‘Having compassion doesn’t relate to my status. She was orphaned at an early age.’ He thought to Abigail now, how he had ignored all of her frantic messages. He couldn’t let her see him. Couldn’t bear to see her either.

‘Once this child is born, you’ll be forging a family line between both your children. They’ll be siblings, raised together or not.’ Her subject-change tactic hadn’t gone unnoticed with Will, but anything was better than dealing with another stereotype regarding his status.

‘That doesn’t sound like something a therapist should say,’ he warned her, thinking on what she said. Surely, he thought, she should be telling him to forget about Felix. Forget about his first kid like he had never been born in the first place. ‘I never had siblings.’

‘I have brothers.’ Her delicate hands moved into the box of presents, fumbling the gifts aside. He felt embarrassed for telling her, for showing her something that he had kept hidden for years. He stood and folded the flaps of the box closed, allowing her to yank her hands out before he pulled it away. She eyed him with blue eyes that didn’t indulge, didn’t pander. He sat down once the box was moved aside and rubbed furiously at his forehead.

‘He might already have siblings. His dad might have had more kids. Might have been raised with them.’ It stung as he said it; the idea of his son growing up warm and safe with siblings he loved with no need for the forgotten parent that brought him into the world.

‘Will, you can’t live on survival mode forever. It isn’t safe for you. For either of you.’ Her hands were gentle, wrapping around his wrists. Her fingers were cool, pressing tight to bone. He felt exposed, panic flaying at his chest. He stared down at his dogs, oblivious to the seriousness of the conversation.

‘Sometimes I feel like I was born in survival mode. I don’t know how to live outside of it.’ Maybe there’d been a time before pressure, disappointment, and fear had clouded his feelings for his father, or his father’s for him. Before he had felt so utterly alone in the world.

Alana’s voice was gentle beside him, even as she let go of his wrists. ‘We make rash decisions when we can’t focus. You can’t be in the business of making rash decisions any longer.’

‘I didn’t make a rash decision to get knocked up.’

‘You made the decision to sleep with a bonded alpha.’ As Alana spoke Will just laughed bitterly. He wasn’t sure whether he was better or worse off on either side of the lie. Either way, he was alone, and he had no one. *Like you wanted.* ‘Would you have made that decision with a clearer mind?’

‘I think I’d feel a lot better if I just slept for a while. If I could just sleep for a few months and wake up from a hard reset.’ Will would like that. Would like to lay in his nest which wasn’t a nest and close his eyes to blankness; to feel nothing and be nothing for a little while. Wake up on the other side of this.

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Will kept to himself at the club. It wasn't like he mixed a whole lot anyway. Came around to bark out orders, break up fights, and deal with the admin. No one mentioned the fact that Hannibal no longer visited, and while they wouldn't know he was pregnant for a few more weeks at least, he was fairly certain that gossip was spreading. His stomach was growing noticeable now, only just hidden by the sweaters rather than the slim-cut shirts from before.

Matthew was sitting on Will's desk when Will came through the office door. It was in those few moments after closing, when the doors had shut and the floor was sticky and damp with booze. Outside of his office the team got to work, collecting empties, laughing tiredly with each other.

'What do you want?' Will asked, wishing that h'd left early. Matthew was lurking, a bottle of beer in hand, dirty grin peeling his lips wide.

'You've been a naughty boy,' Matthew said, dropping his beer to the desk as Will walked further into the room. 'Real naughty.'

'If you have something to say can you just say it?' Will wanted to stand, wanted to leave the room. It was tricky navigating Matthew. Things had been fine up until Christmas, when he had seen far too much of the two of them.

He knew that Matthew was intoxicated with him. Wanted to fuck him. Wanted to bond with him. Wanted them to go wild together and tear through the world. Wanted their violence to be elevated to something else. He was too young for Will, and too unpredictable. Will was also four months pregnant, but he wouldn't be telling Matthew that.

'I'm just saying that I know some of your secrets.' Will could smell him, smell the headiness of his arousal. The way it made his own body try and betray him. He turned his back to Matthew, adjusting the pens on his desk. He was a fiddler, always needed something to distract himself with.

'You don't have many options left. Lecter's tossed you aside. I'm an alpha, you're an omega. We get on well enough,' Matthew leaned close. One hand slid around Will's chest, pulling him close. Matthew's nose against his nape, breathing in his scent. Will could feel his heart racing, mouth starting to fill with too much saliva. He swallowed it down as the hand snaked high over his chest. Matthew's erection pressed against him from behind. 'You could just close your eyes and pretend I'm him.'

'Stop,' Will said, keeping his body loose, even when he wanted to seize up. He took a breath as he felt Matthew grow more excited behind him. 'You need to start thinking, Matthew.'

'Why are you so resistant? I can smell how much you want it. I know I wouldn't be your first. I know Hannibal wasn't the first knot you took either. God. *Fuck.* Let me have you.' Matthew was almost quivering behind him, desperate for it. Will took it as his chance to slide away, keeping hold of the hand that was pressing tight to his chest. He rolled until he was behind Matthew, still holding his arm, twisting it behind his back. With a knee to the small of his back, Will managed to get Matthew shoved down over his desk.

Matthew seized up, crying out as Will pulled his arm tight. He slid his free hand around, until his fingers grabbed at Matthew's short hair. Not enough to tug, not like Hannibal's, but a threat all the same. Matthew's neck was heated, his body almost thrumming with arousal. Will could feel his own body responding, even when he blinked it away.

'You come near me again I will fucking gut you,' he said, spitting the words into Matthew's ear. 'I don't care if you want to fuck me. I don't care if you know any of my secrets, just do me a favour and leave me the hell alone.'

Will squeezed his fingers tight, nails scraping over scalp. He yanked on Matthew's arm again for good measure before he let him go. Matthew drooped to his knees in a wheezing coughing fit, catching too much breath at once. Will left him there, slamming the door to his office behind him. He slid down the staircase and out through the back door, vomiting as cold air hit his face.

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Thoughts of parenthood had taken up unwanted space in Hannibal's head. It felt like such a betrayal to have his body fall to his biological whims. He had looked after Will the night of his heat. He had taken him up to his nest once they had finished and held him until he slept. He should have made sure that Will had taken emergency contraception when he awoke. It hadn't crossed his mind.

They had never discussed the prospect of children because it was so irrelevant to their relationship. They were perfect as they were, an alpha and omega, wholly understanding of their boundaries and on equal partnership. An omega needed to be touched and soothed. An alpha needed to be tended to. Hannibal had no desire to keep an omega and one like Will wasn't made to be bonded down. They survived their biological urges together.

But now?

Now they were to be parents. Or according to Will, Hannibal was nothing more than a sperm donor in an uneasy situation that Mason Verger had forced them into. Yet parenthood was looming between them, and Will had cut off contact. Hannibal thought back to Will's docile nature at the lake house, how he had revealed parts of himself he'd kept locked up for years. Instead of putting up his usual walls or sending Hannibal away, he had pulled him closer. Wanted to be petted. Wanted to cuddle. Hannibal could hardly stop his own body and thoughts reacting to that.

Matthew was not helping Hannibal's current state of distracted irritation. There was something to unlock in how the young alpha clamoured after Will. It made sense that he wanted to pursue an omega with a clamour for aggression, but Will needed an anchor for his violence, someone to guide him down the path of righteousness. Without just cause, there was no passion. His empathy, heightened somehow beyond him omega nature, could darken to an intensity that only Hannibal had seen manifest. Matthew would not be able to control it.

And Will was *his.* They were unmated, but there was an unspoken agreement, just as his associates wouldn't pursue Abigail, none would go for Will either. He was probably too old and too touchy for any of their tastes. His scent was neutralised and therefore didn't tend to

excite them. But now it had been made somewhat clear that Will was no longer in the inner circle, Matthew's pheromones had peeked just at the thought. Hannibal had heard that there'd been an altercation at the club between Will and Matthew, the alpha's wrist had been bruised and strapped the next time Hannibal had seen him, but he'd said nothing to anyone about it.

'A muzzle is no bad thing when a dog needs guidance.' Matthew's voice carried across the table. It was a small affair. Just his closest men and Abigail. News had spread in the last few weeks about Will's appearance at the club, at how his stomach had swollen with the obvious sign of pregnancy. He had left the spot beside him empty him, a reminder to everyone of Will's absence.

'I find the idea of muzzling any dog barbaric,' Hannibal said, flashing his eyes down toward Matthew. The young alpha's skin was damp with excitement, his eyes aglow. Even Tier was looking toward him with discomfort. News of Will's pregnancy had silenced Matthew for a time, but he appeared buoyant that Hannibal hadn't claimed the child as his own.

'A leash then,' Matthew said, eyes flicking to Hannibal's in an almost challenge. Hannibal smiled, drawing his lips around his wine glass, sucking down a slow mouthful. Matthew was scrappy and violent, one of the reasons why he worked so well, but he could be put down just as easy. 'If he'd been leashed he might have behaved himself a little better.'

'I think Will would probably kill you both for talking about him like that.' Abigail's voice cut through with her reasoning. Hannibal smirked at Matthew one final time before he nodded his head towards Abigail, agreeing with her point.

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Interest was waning between Abigail and Matthew. It was hard to keep him interested when his mind was so distracted. She knew that he had teased and flirted with her deliberately in front of Will to frustrate and annoy. Now that everyone *knew* that Will was no longer around, his interest in her had faded.

She'd been upset that Will hadn't told her his *big news*. She found out by the gossiping women she worked with. One of them had gone to the club and seen him come out of his office with an obvious bump beneath his clothes. Hannibal was cagey as anything when he was at home. Will wasn't talking to her. They'd both shut her out and all she had left was that soul-destroying job and her original plan to spy on whatever it was that Matthew was doing.

The relationship had become less romantic and more an experiment in bitter teasing. He had come to her one night when she had finished at the art gallery. Hannibal was out, dealing with *business* and acting more and more trite. She was sitting in the upstairs living room, the TV playing an old-school sitcom that she remembered from her childhood. *Mom would put it on after she got home from school. Twenty minutes of laugh-track familiarity before she started on her homework at the kitchen table. Freshly baked cookies sat beside her on the faded china plate granny had gifted them years back.*

'I know you think he's your family. Two sad omegas caught in the web of Hannibal Lecter's lies together.' Matthew was in a feral mood as he sat beside her. Abigail had grown up with a dangerous father and lived with another one now. She'd learned to pick up on different

moods, knew how to navigate them. Matthew wasn't any different. 'I know something you don't know.'

'Are we talking about Will again. I know he's pregnant. Everyone knows.' Hannibal definitely knew. He'd become awful to live with. All he did was work; meetings with councillors and putting his name forward when she hadn't realised he cared all that much about politics in the first place. When she did see him, the aggression bubbling beneath the surface of his skin was palpable. His dinner parties had been non-existent.

'I know something *else* about him that you don't. A little secret,' he teased it, dangled it above her head. 'You want to be like him, but you can't. You're too old to replicate some of his issues.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.' She froze, unsure how to respond. There was a fire in his eyes, like he was onto something special even when everyone knew how Will had rejected him *again.*

'He had a pup when he was fifteen. Didn't want it. Threw it away. Why do you think he cares about you so much? You're the replacement. Well, the *first* replacement. Now he's replaced you…'

'You're lying,' she said even as her stomach dropped. She refocused, licking her dry lips 'You know, the kid he's carrying now can't be Hannibal's. He's too old fashioned to not bond Will and force him into marriage, but it's not yours either. Which means there must be someone else.'

'I'm not lying.' Matthew said, stretching his arms out against the back of the couch and ignoring the last part of her conversation. His fingers brushed her shoulder and as much as she wanted to pull free, she stopped. Hannibal had set her the task of getting information from Matthew. About Will. To protect Will. No one was talking to anyone, but she was still convinced that he'd want her to do this.

'How do you even know this? Will wouldn't have told you. *If* it is true.'

'It isn't hard to find shit out, not when you're really looking. I learned to know where to look,' he said, licking his lips. He smiled at her and she waited a beat, trying to determine her own reaction as her heart rocked into her chest, as disappointment that Will had…not lied, but not told her the truth either. Eventually she smiled back, resting her hand on his arm.

'Tell me more,' she said, rolling into his side.

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Will found himself sitting in Franklyn's cluttered apartment more and more. He liked being at home with his dogs, but he felt the loneliness creeping in, felt the twitching in his restless body. Hated sleeping in a bed that only smelled of himself. Once he was finished at the club each night, he had nowhere else to go.

Four months and being able to hide it had quickly turned into six and unmistakably pregnant. His scent had changed, although he still washed it away when he was at the club. But people he worked with knew; they looked at him differently, or didn't look at him at all. Eyes fixed down at his stomach, his bare neck, or over his shoulder as if they were embarrassed by the situation. Rumours had abounded. No wonder Hannibal had kicked him free of the inner circle. It was like high school all over again.

And Franklyn smelled *good.* He smelled of warmth and safety. He asked questions about the baby, but he never asked who the father was. He allowed Will to calm himself down on his couch, eyes closed. He brought soft tissues and didn't comment on how quickly Will went through them when his nose would bleed so often.

'I was thinking…' Will peeled his eyes open to Franklyn's hesitating voice. He'd been sitting at his computer, tapping away as he worked, but now he stood in front of Will for a few seconds, taking a seat beside him eventually.

'What about?' Will preferred it when they didn't speak. When he could focus on the noises in the apartment, Franklyn's loud breathing and the chaos from the street below.

'I have money. Quite a lot. And uh. Well. I wouldn't expect *anything* but I could offer you a bond. If that's what you want. We could get married and once you go into your next heat I could bond you. To protect you. I wouldn't force any more children, but we could raise this one together.'

'You know you're not even the first alpha to propose this year,' Will said, watching Franklyn's face carefully. For a full three seconds he thought about accepting. It wouldn't be so bad. Franklyn would never be able to protect him, or himself from Will, but the idea of a *family.* It stung. 'But you're the closest I've come to accepting.'

'So that's a no?'

'Are you attracted to me?'

'You *are* incredibly beautiful, but no. I just want to protect you.' Franklyn looked down but Will sensed relief on his face.

'Are you trying to angle for a godparent role or just a middle name honour?' he teased, laughing when Franklyn stumbled into an unconscious giggle. The tension dissipated between them. 'I'm thin on the ground when it comes to friends so you're in with a good chance.'

'Are you going to find out what you're having?' Franklyn never asked before touching Will's stomach, but he didn't mind. He was an alpha and Will was touch-starved.

'A surprise would be best. It still doesn't feel real to me, I don't think I'm going to know it's real until I have it. Until then it's just guesswork.' It should have been awkward after that, but it wasn't. Franklyn moved back to his computer and Will closed his eyes again, soaking in the mind-numbing safety of his warm alpha scent.

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Hannibal had been unsettled for weeks. Will, growing Hannibal's child in his belly but walking around unmated, had been all he'd thought about. Rumours had been fed back to Hannibal. Will was showing at the club. That Hannibal had disowned him only made people think that it was someone else's child and that made irrational jealousy spike in his chest. It made Hannibal lose focus. Made him focus on his breathing, on how tense and uncharitable his good mood was.

Most times he would take a second to roll his head back, feel the aggression rising from his chest and allow it to wash over him, but some nights even that was too much effort. One evening during a solo dinner at his restaurant, he had been unable to swallow his urges down. A rude waiter, an alpha with no respect for those he waited on, had grated on Hannibal's final shredded nerve. Alpha on alpha and he'd set the waiter off into a violent rut. He had got a few punches in, before young solid fists landed over his cheekbone, across his brow and against his jaw. His security had torn them apart eventually, had pulled Hannibal away and thrown him into the back of his car, explaining the issue to Matthew, who had been parked around the block waiting for him.

All an alpha ever needed was a good fucking to calm them down in this state. An omega to pander to their needs; to present themselves as willing. Matthew had booked him into his favoured suite at the Pendry and discreetly bought the services of two omegas to help him oversee the rut until he calmed. Until he was back into his controlled mindset again.

He sent the two omegas on their way with a favourable tip and zero conversation. Then he sat in one of the dark leather armchairs, staring at the rich tones of the décor. The room was provided deliberately with alphas in mind. The finely curated artwork on the walls. Dark furniture, and an excessively large bed. Alcohol wasn't limited. He nursed a whiskey, knuckles cracked and scabbing over with dried blood. His body so taut, his cock aching where it tented the front of his slacks.

A clear head was easier to keep when he had Will around, who could pick out a fractious mood without saying a word, who would be waiting in Hannibal's bedroom long after everyone had left for the night. The scent of him, the touch of his hands sliding over Hannibal's chest. Nuzzling his head to Hannibal's tight jaw until his body relaxed. A come down without the senseless rutting. Hannibal infinitely preferred it. Regaining control and composure with Will's help. They understood their individual needs without needing to say a word.

His jaw was bruised. There was a loose back tooth that wobbled when prodded with his tongue. His knuckles on his right fist were bruised and bloody, a blackening eye that he could feel swelling. His heartbeat had quickened like it never normally did, the haze of an alpha rut falling over him. He felt vulnerable and foolish for losing it so publicly. His men would clean up, his lawyers would have NDA's drawn up for everyone in his restaurant, but this still felt like a clink in the armour.

There was the sound of footsteps outside the hotel suite and then the press of a keycard against the door before it flew open. Will's scent enveloped him immediately. Darkly

perfumed, but with something a little sweeter now. Pregnancy had changed him. Hannibal watched and absorbed, growing quiet.

‘You look a mess.’

The words cut exactly how Will intended them to. Hannibal was sitting upright in a chair in the corner of the room There was a gash over his lip, across his nose. His hair askew and flopping into his eyes. He’d been in a fight and had lost by the looks of it. He’d allowed his rage get the better of him. Impending fatherhood could do that.

‘Matthew called Abigail saying that you’d fallen into a rut. Got yourself all roughed up with another alpha. He told her so she wouldn’t expect you home for dinner. She told *me* because she thought you’d prefer to get through this with me rather than anyone else. Even if we’re not talking.’

‘She shouldn’t have called you.’ The churlish pinch to Hannibal’s tone had Will rolling his eyes. His slid his arms from his coat, hanging it on the back of the door. Hannibal’s scent filled the room, rich and heady. Soothing. The scent reminded him of nights locked in the suite in Hannibal’s house, bodies pressed together. Reminded him of those few days at Christmas. Secrets unfolding between them; Mischa, Felix.

‘Well, I can always call back those omegas that Matthew left you with. They’ll do the trick just fine.’ Will could smell Hannibal’s arousal. Past the blood. It almost made his legs go weak. Made heat coil inside, dampening between his legs and his mouth pool with saliva. He trailed his fingers down his shirt, loosening the buttons, revealing skin that set Hannibal’s eyes alight. He was showing now, just enough. A neat little bump that set tongues wagging.

‘You helped me through my issue. I’m going to help you through yours.’ He tried to be noncommittal about it as he shed his underwear and jeans. How many times had they fucked? How many times had they fucked after Will had stopped talking to him for days on end? It was a pattern they continued over and over.

‘Better on a chair than the kitchen floor,’ Hannibal said, hands sliding to Will’s sides as he straddled his lap once naked. The feel of a heavy wool suit between his bare thighs was enough to stir something in Will, his knees pressing into the leather of the chair. He felt long fingers fold over the curve of his ass, pulling him closer. Hannibal in a rut was different. Rougher, harsher. Less attentive. Maybe that’s what Will wanted.

A hand pressing eagerly between Will’s legs, behind his cock that was slowly starting to fill. Hannibal’s fingers were long and strong. Sometimes, sometimes Will would touch himself to the memory of them. Close his eyes and imagine Hannibal’s fingers and tongue taking Will apart.

‘Past this moment we have more to discuss.’

‘Get me off first. Then you can have me. Then we can talk more.’ He kissed Hannibal, stopping anything else. Pushing down panic when it wanted to overwhelm him. Beneath his splayed thighs, Hannibal was hard and quivering. His crotch was damp and tented, soaking

the inside where Will was starting to dampen on the outside. His own body reacting to the thick arousal of Hannibal's; the anger softening to lust.

There was no time for decency right now. Will let Hannibal kiss him hard and wet, sucked his tongue into his mouth until the obscene wet press of saliva dripped down his chin. He pulled open Hannibal's pants and pulled him out, fingers tracing the thick head, spilling wet with pre-come, down the length to where his knot was starting to fill. He settled it against his own, his thighs shaking on Hannibal's lap. His head clouding with the heady scent of an alpha bordering on a rut. Will wrapped one hand around his own eager cock, thrusting tightly into his palm as Hannibal's fingers made a slow crawl up, pressing to the slit behind his cock.

'You feel so good,' Hannibal was saying, debauched and almost buzzing beneath Will. He felt delirious, naked against Hannibal's fully clothed skin. A half hour ago Will was sitting in traffic debating even coming here, letting Hannibal sulk out his rut with bought omegas that he wouldn't use.

'Just like that.' Hannibal's fingers curved upwards inside, deliberate and precise. No one had ever taken Will apart in the same way. He rocked down onto Hannibal's hand, cheek pressed against cheek, fingers working over the slick skin of his cock until he shuddered through his quick release.

Will crawled onto the bed after, lightheaded from his own orgasm. Sex had been so traumatising after his first time, he'd been unwilling to let anyone close afterwards. When he had slept with others it was never in a mounting pose. Until Hannibal. Hannibal liked to take him from behind. There was safety in how Hannibal would manhandle him, enough danger to leave Will panting for more, but safe in the trust that he wouldn't lose his mind to the rut. Would stop if Will asked him to.

He waited in that position now, knees splayed, back arched. Gathering his breath, body exposed as he heard the familiar sounds of Hannibal undressing. Leather belt sliding from the loops, heavy wool suit always folded and never dropped to the ground like Will would his own clothes. Always careful, always cautious, even when his body was singing to join Will on the bed.

Will arched his hips higher when he felt himself being prised apart by the thick head of Hannibal's cock, dripping wet, giddy in his mid-rut status. Hannibal's wide palm pressed into the small of his back, his thumb rubbing over the pucker of his asshole in a tease. Hannibal moved Will's thighs further apart with a slap of his hands before fingers curled over his hips, pulling him back onto his cock in one solid thrust.

Will stretched his body serenely, palms sliding damp into the soft sheets, forehead grinding down into the bedding. He could feel Hannibal deep inside, heavy and wet, pulsing against the tightness of his body. The slick wet sounds of their bodies meeting, the gasping choked moans as Hannibal finally allowed himself to indulge. It was different when Hannibal was in a rut, like a persistent intrusive slide that Will couldn't quite get enough of. He shuddered at the thought of a mutual rut-heat. Imagined how intense it would feel. How *wet* he would get.

Will laid there and let Hannibal take him, adjusting and arching so that his sensitive cock stopped catching on the sheets. This was about Hannibal, about feeding that need. He still

moaned when he felt the pressure of Hannibal's knot pressing inside. He was dragged up onto his knees, the weight of his body, the stretch of his thighs splayed, making him ache. One hand beneath the gentle slope of his stomach, where their pup grew. Will rolled his head back onto Hannibal's broad shoulder, let teeth glide over sensitive skin.

'Bite me,' he said, feeling Hannibal's hand slide up over his tender chest and grip at his throat. He could smell the copper scent of Hannibal's bloodied knuckles, wanted to suck the blood clean but he rolled his head down, mouth reaching for Hannibal's splayed thumb and sucking it into his mouth as teeth clamped down over the side of his throat.

Hannibal's knot was swelling inside him, Will's thighs splayed over Hannibal's, his ass tucked to Hannibal's heated lap, his wet cunt clenching tight against the pulsing cock. He was still soft, but with one gentle hand over his stomach, the other tilting his jaw, it was enough. It was enough for Will to pretend for a little bit. He wasn't in a heat. He couldn't be bonded to Hannibal, but he would wear his marks over his throat for a few days after. He'd never allowed it before. Their relationship remained an unspoken oddity to anyone that knew them. No one thought they were fucking, because if they were, surely Hannibal would have him knotted and mated, a little of pups between them and a scarred throat. He would have no business managing a club, or the *other things* he did whenever Hannibal asked.

Now he had a growing stomach and he'd have a bruised throat and it wouldn't be quite so humiliating walking around. Normal omegas were bonded before they got themselves in this position. Especially at his age. At least he'd had the excuse of youth the last time around.

Will's hands slid up behind, tugging on Hannibal's slick damp hair as their bodies rocked together, as he felt the sharp sting of Hannibal's teeth biting and sucking at his throat. He could only get one orgasm out of the night, too tired for anything else and coming on three of Hannibal's long fingers, over his clothed lap, had been good enough. This felt more intimate. As Hannibal started to come inside him, his body shaking behind Will, he turned to press his face to the hard angle of Hannibal's cheek, panting out wordless desires.

As they remained knotted, Hannibal pulled him back down, seated fully in his lap and sitting up against the headboard. He felt gentle fingers in his hair, curling softly and scraping against his scalp. After a while, he pulled Hannibal's hands away from his hair and fixed them over his own eyes until the room was shaded from view. All he could smell was Hannibal, all he could feel was where they were joined inside his body; the gentle thud of Hannibal's heartbeat against his back. Hannibal's palms grew wet as tears started to leak from Will's eyes, but he didn't say a word. Just let it happen.

Afterward Hannibal sat quietly, recovering from the intensity of his rut. Will had wiped down the insides of his thighs in the bathroom with a damp cloth. He caught sight of himself in the mirror, his flushed skin, his hair darkened with sweat and curling over his forehead, his eyes red-ringed and swollen. The sight made his stomach curl. He blinked it away and then flicked the light off. He pulled on Hannibal's shirt. Too large over the shoulders, but not large enough to really fit around the middle anymore. The richness of the fabric felt cool against his skin. He felt entirely smothered inside and out with Hannibal's scent. He pressed the cuff to his nose for a few quiet seconds before he returned to the bedroom.

He set out ice, gauze from a first aid kit and another damp cloth, placing them on the bed beside Hannibal as he climbed back over. He should have cleaned him up before, but he'd been too distracted. Hannibal pulled him close, over his lap, and Will allowed it.

'I could look after you. You could let me take care of you. Of you both.' Hannibal was sitting up, allowing Will to clean up the cuts on his face. He never flinched, even with the sting of alcohol burning his wounded flesh. Will traced the touch with his thumb all the same, taking on board Hannibal's comments, at how they made something warm flood him.

'I don't need that.'

'I could find Felix for you. Bring him back.'

'Back to what?' Will felt the timbre in his voice shake, but he didn't stop the hands tracing over his waist. Wandering and *wondering.* He so desperately wanted to take Hannibal home with him, back to Wolf Trap and back into his nest. Wanted it so much that there was a physical ache in his chest. 'Bring him into this insidious lifestyle? Find out his father is a murderer? That I kill for a man that isn't even my alpha, and that I do it willingly? He's better off far away from me.'

'You may find that the apple doesn't fall too far from the tree.'

'Maybe. He's not much younger than his dad was when he was conceived. Maybe he's knocked some dumb omega up.' Will paused and then frowned. Horrified at the idea that he could be a grandparent before his mid-thirties were over. 'What do you mean by that? You haven't…you haven't found him.'

'I wouldn't without your permission.' Fingers wrapped tight, fingers that were normally cold but felt warm. The residual burn-out from the rut. 'Why do you care so much about how people perceive you?'

'I've worked hard to be something other than my status, and now all people see me as is *this.* I get to carry around the result of my weakness beneath my clothes, growing more obvious every day. The one shining point is the fact I'm carrying your child and not Masons Verger's. But everyone stares and everyone knows.'

'I didn't think you cared what people thought of you.'

'I don't but it doesn't mean it isn't hard. It doesn't make the humiliation any less exhausting. My armour is well-worn and I'm tired.' Will closed his eyes so that he didn't have to see Hannibal, so that he could breathe in his deep scent and nothing else.

'What is to be done about this, Will. Tell me what it is that you want.'

'Some things have to become more than us. My work for you is *just* and it is *right,* even when it's wrong, but I don't… I don't want my kid growing up like that. I don't want them turning out like Abigail. Where her closest bond is with someone like me.'

'Someone like you?'

‘My therapist thinks that a married man fathered this kid. That was the easier option than explaining this.’ Will knew his words were cutting Hannibal. It almost seemed cruel. He laughed sadly with no humour attached, stroking his hand over Hannibal’s bruised cheek. ‘You did not come out of this fight on top.’

‘I usually have someone to fight my battles for me,’ Hannibal said, leaning into Will’s hand like a kitten asking for a pet. He indulged for a few long seconds before pulling away.

Will pressed the ice to Hannibal’s jaw for a few moments before attending to his bloodied knuckles. This was all an odd ritual, Will taking care of his alpha, moping him up after a battle. Taking care of him as his alpha would take care of him. He watched Hannibal’s eyes slide down, hands following until fingers were sliding beneath the open gape of his shirt hanging over Will’s shoulders, encircling his waist. Where their child grew. Will tried to find words, something to say that was neither bitter nor sentimental. A child that neither had anticipated, that hadn’t been wanted and yet anticipation grew at the thought. Will slid his own hands over Hannibal’s, where they held him close.

‘You’re wearing more than just my child in your stomach now,’ Hannibal said, eyes moving over Will’s neck. Will pressed his nails into Hannibal’s scraped knuckles. A warning that he was overstepping the mark. ‘Tell me about the man that fathered your first child.’

‘Nope.’ Will pushed Hannibal’s hands from his body and then leaned over, pouring a glass of water from the jug sitting on the nightstand. He drained it, and then poured again, handing it to Hannibal. He watched cautiously while Hannibal drank, the bob of his throat, stubble starting to grow in coarse and grey after a few days without the razor. ‘You’re only asking me that because you know he’s an alpha and you’re jealous.’

‘An unfortunate side effect of my status,’ Hannibal shrugged, hooking fingers to Wills elbow and drawing him close again. ‘It says more about me than you, but I would still like for you to indulge me.’

‘It didn’t matter where we moved. Every summer the lakes would fill with rich kids using their parent’s money to fund their time on yachts. His parents owned this giant vacation house. He would come to the lake, drink with his friends. He teased and flirted, and I resisted until I didn’t want to. I asked him not to knot me, but he said I wouldn’t get pregnant because I hadn’t had my first heat yet.’ A brief window into the past, Hannibal stepped inside briefly, imagined Will impossibly young and inexperienced. His clueless beta father unable to raise him.

‘But you did fall pregnant.’

‘And I have again. And I can’t lose this one. Your life is not compatible with a child. Our life together is not compatible with raising a child.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘You take things from people that you consider no longer deserving.’

‘And you kill when you think they aren’t deserving.’

Will levelled his eyes at Hannibal, brow wrinkling. ‘I kill for *you.*’

‘I unburdened you from living a life with your eyes blinded; your senses dulled. I’ve never been there to put the knife in your hand, you get to that point all alone. You could go back to managing the club. If that’s what you desire.’ He couldn’t of course. They both knew Hannibal would never allow that.

‘I want to raise a kid that doesn’t have to think about these things. The things we think about. I want my kid to be happy.’

‘You think I can’t provide that. Is Abigail not happy? Am I not her parent?’

‘You’re her parent because you murdered her father.’ Anger slipped into the tone of Will’s voice, lowering the timbre. ‘Her greatest desire is to be like me and that’s— that is *not* healthy.’

‘I’m only fostering something that was at ready there. As I did with you.’

‘If we were bonded you could take this child from me. I would belong to you. The child would belong to you. It’s mine. If I was to become disposable, you could send me away. Bonds don’t affect alphas in the same way, not physically. You could leave me and take the kid.’ Announcing his fear terrified Will a little, enough that he dragged a nervous hand over his own forehead. ‘I can’t raise a child and work for you. Do this with you. I can’t. Verger took me because he thought you *owned* me. To weaponize me against you as punishment. Imagine what they would do for your child? I can fight back but a kid can’t.’

‘So you would deny me my child?’ Hannibal asked. His hand moving again to Will's bared stomach.

‘I’m doing what is necessary. I don’t want *anything* from you Hannibal. I’ll quit the club. I’ve never spent much money. I have savings. That’ll see me through the first part.’

Will watched as Hannibal’s fingers twitched, his lips puckering, but that was all the emotion he showed. He wasn’t rigid as he’d been before, wasn’t burning with his rut. That Will had made him simultaneously furious and relaxed was a power move that he couldn’t indulge in. Hannibal could still hurt him. As Will had hurt him.

‘I will sell it, I think. The money will go into an account for the child. How old is your son?’

Will watched Hannibal for a time, unable to stop his forehead furrowing before he answered, ‘Almost seventeen.’

‘Then you can have our child for sixteen years uninterrupted, but then I will return for them and they will know that I fathered them. That you denied their alpha father access to them.’

‘The situations are entirely different, Hannibal.’

‘No. I’m sure as an omega it is harder, but to take a child from an alpha who could provide for them? I could look after you both. Your lives will be infinitely harder alone.’ He said the words to hurt, Will knew this and yet he couldn’t stop the anger from burning him up. He

stood up from the bed, buttoning up Hannibal's shirt as best he could. What he couldn't button, he covered with his zipped-up coat. Jeans, socks, shoes.

'Sell the club or don't. I don't need looking after.' Will rubbed a hand over his face, pushing back his hair. Hannibal stayed propped against the bed, his movements stilled to an inch. 'Put the money in an account or don't. I'm going to go back on the suppressants when I'm done feeding the kid. I'll get a job. I'll raise our child and you can fucking try and take them from me, but I'll kill you if you even think about it.'

'Then I suppose I shall have to return the offer.' Something ached in his chest, but Will swallowed it down like a bitter pill. This had been inevitable, the conversation they were bound to have after hours of love making, of settling his alpha's aggressive rut. Hannibal wasn't *his,* not in any way that mattered. 'If I see you before I come to get the child, I will have you both slaughtered.'

Will stood, stock still. Between the silence was words upon words, Will could hear them loud even over his racing heart. There was an ache. Deep and cavernous. He put his hand over his heart and listened to the beating, faster than it was ordinarily. It was the same for Hannibal too, he was sure of it.

'Goodbye Hannibal,' he said, not turning to look at the man on the bed.

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Abigail could feel her heart racing as she stood in Hannibal's private study. She hadn't been invited. *Neither had Will*. She stroked her hands up and down the arms of the chair. When she had text Will the night before about Hannibal's dissent into an aggressive rut, she half imagined she'd find the two of them back at the house, having made up. Yeah, Will was pregnant, but Hannibal was honourable and he'd make it right. He loved him. He would make it up to him.

But it had been just Hannibal that had returned, although she could smell Will's scent on Hannibal when she saw him over breakfast, noticed the slight glaze in his eyes even if he seemed subdued. It would be easier having the conversation with Hannibal alone. She wasn't sure how she felt about Will, about his past or the current pregnancy, or the fact that he'd dropped her like she was nothing important. *A replacement*. They hadn't spoken in nearly two months. He wouldn't return her calls or her texts. Texting him yesterday and knowing that he had gone to Hannibal had been the only good thing he'd done for her.

'Abigail.' Hannibal's eyes lingered on her as he stepped into the office later that evening. She knew that he knew that she'd been in there a while. She pulled her arms tightly around herself, standing tall despite the nerves caused by the dark energy radiating off him.

'How's Will?' she asked bitterly, and then wished she hadn't when she saw the look he returned. She pinched her lips together, walking around the room. 'I spoke to Matthew the other day. I was going to come to you with it but then…yesterday with your *thing*. Anyway Matthew said that Will had a kid. That he gave him up.'

‘A son, yes,’ Hannibal said, but he was suddenly focused on her. ‘He didn’t give him up. He was taken. There is a difference, Abigail.’

‘I don’t understand.’ She took a seat at his desk, trying not to take the betrayal to heart. Having Hannibal confirm that it was true and that he knew made it ache even more. ‘Why didn’t he tell me?’

‘Will lives a carefully curated life. He allows you to see only what he wants, so that you will not get too close. So that you cannot get hurt. He was very young when it happened, I don’t think he enjoys dwelling on it.’

‘He could have told me.’ God, she felt childish. She thought about all those times she had whispered confessions to him, things she hadn’t told anyone. Suddenly, she realised she knew so little of him.

‘Perhaps he would. One day.’ Hannibal was off. His movements too stiff, despite the work Will had done the night before easing him. He licked his lips, his tongue grazing his sharp canines. His eyes flickered to Abigail and then away. ‘What did Matthew say about Will’s son?’

‘That he knows where to find him.’ Hannibal smiled at her words, standing to his full height, his lips parted revealing sharp teeth. He was always a predator, but she almost felt like his prey in that moment. The stiffness of his body seemed to fall away immediately.

‘You’ve done well, Abigail. If Matthew knows where the boy is then that means Verger does. Invite Matthew for dinner. I think we are all in dire need of a conversation.’ He brought her in close, one large hand on the back of her neck. It was neither affectionate nor cold. The sensation just made her stomach flip.

‘What about Will? Shouldn’t he know?’

‘Will is best left to his own devices for the time being,’ Hannibal said, his placid expression taken as a sharp warning when she felt his fingers gripping tight to the back of her neck. *Keep him out of it*. She felt nervous, swallowing thickly before she nodded her head.

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Alana was staring at his throat; at the bruises he had asked Hannibal to decorate him with. He’d lost the morning to the bathroom mirror, uncharacteristically staring at his reflection. He looked like a true omega should, with a collar of purple bruises around his throat. Hannibal’s shirt had been added to his nest, his scent still lingering in the tightly woven threads of the fabric. With how his neck was marked and with his not-alpha’s scent in his nest, it was the best he was going to get. It was enough. It was the calmest he had felt in months. He’d slept last night, even past the ache in his chest for what he had lost.

‘Hannibal Lecter did it,’ Will said, waiting for Alana’s eyes to finally meet his. There was something in her face that he couldn’t focus on. Couldn’t work out if it was sympathy for him or fear. ‘He’s the father. We were never really together; it was just an agreement we had. I lost my job last night, officially. I lost a lot, actually but I’m okay.’

‘Why are you telling me now?’ Her voice was a whisper, her face a wash of white. Will studied her and then looked away. All she saw, all she heard, were the bad parts of Hannibal. She wouldn’t understand that Hannibal’s darkness was only matched by his own.

‘I lied to protect myself. To protect him, but we’ve reached an agreement.’ The words didn’t sound right. They sounded clinical, but if he attached any emotion he was afraid he’d break. ‘I lie to so many people. Little white lies dropping like crumbs back to the gingerbread house. You’ve picked some of them up already. I’m just giving you the rest.’

‘Are you in danger?’ Will remembered the feel of Hannibal’s lips on his throat, the scent of him. How it felt taking him inside his body. Cleaning his wounds up; how good it was being the only one that could calm him down. Looking after his alpha and being cared for in return.

‘There was a finality in our last meeting.’ Hannibal had another thing coming he if ever thought Will would give this child over to him. He’d lie about the parentage, if needs be. Or kill Hannibal. He wouldn’t think twice. ‘I did was what necessary.’

‘Do you love him?’ Will nodded before he could stop himself, and then regretted it because therapist or not, he didn’t want to his vulnerability exposed any further than it already was.

‘It’s going to be fine,’ he said, rubbing his hands together. He touched his neck, where there was no scarring, but bite marks that would fade after a time. He gave her a smile, a split broken thing that had her flinching. She looked tired, worn out and worried. ‘Don’t worry about me, Dr Bloom. Don’t care about me. It’s better if you don’t.’

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for sticking with this little story and letting me fumble through omegaverse for the first time lol.

Two things:
1. Everything is tagged that should be, but there is quite a lot of violence & threats against infanticide in this chapter. Please proceed with caution.
2. There's more to come in this 'verse, but this just felt like a natural end to this arc.

TY!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was to be an intimate dinner. Just Hannibal, Abigail, and Matthew. Hannibal had made sure all his men were occupied elsewhere. He needed an empty house and absolute concentration from Abigail if this was to be pulled off. There was a lot at stake.

‘You love Will, right?’ Abigail was supposed to be peeling potatoes for that gratin, but she was staring up at Hannibal, pale-faced, with her hands almost shaking. He looked down at the blade in her hand as it quivered on the chopping board. ‘Even if he did something awful?’

‘What is it you think he must have done?’

‘Isn’t it obvious?’ she bumped her fist lightly to her flat stomach, frowning at him.

‘You think the child is someone else’s?’

Her head tilted in confusion even as her hands stilled. ‘If it’s yours why aren’t you supporting him?’

‘Will’s only memories of pregnancy are embedded so deeply in trauma that he can’t fathom the idea of sharing the child with anyone else.’ Hannibal paused, that unfamiliar ache wrapping tight around his chest for a moment. It disappeared when he thought of taking Matthew apart. Sinew shed from muscle; skin flayed. Taken apart and fed to Will’s dogs perhaps. ‘I have only behaved as irrational as he has.’

‘But do you love him?’

‘I would have thought our plan tonight would suggest my feelings towards him.’

‘Will’s a mess. He’s always been a mess inside, I think. Maybe you should have told him how you felt before it got to this.’

Hannibal didn't want to consider Abigail's thoughts on the matter. Her opinions were usually juvenile and spurned by compassion and youthful naïveté, but he thought about how his last two meetings with Will had been. Neither of them had behaved particularly well.

'I'm doing this for him now.'

'What are you doing for him, Hannibal? what are we doing?'

'Saving his son.'

'But he doesn't know about that, does he?' a crooked smile to the corner of Abigail's mouth. Hannibal looked away half in thought. 'He thinks your relationship isn't balanced because you hide things like this from him.'

'I'm just protecting him.'

'To protect isn't to hide things from him.'

Hannibal considered further. Perhaps he should involve Will, but he'd rather not. Extracting his son would be far easier without Will's involvement. His behaviour toward Ingram had been irrational overreaction at best, and he had far less emotion attached to it. No, he would keep Will out of it. Find the boy, call will and return them to each other. Then, perhaps, they would put their violence to the side and discuss things reasonably.

'Would you like me to chop instead?' he said, focusing his attention back on Abigail. Her hand had stopped shaking, but he heard the sound of his front door opening, Matthew readying himself for dinner. He was early, but that was okay. Hannibal closed his hand over Abigail's on the blade and smiled at her.

'Are you ready?'

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Abigail wasn't entirely sure what had happened. One minute they were talking to Matthew quite calmly. Or Hannibal was, his hands resting on Matthew's shoulders, pinning him down to his chair and extracting as much information as he could. He was three fingers down on his left hand, the bloody stumps oozing. The next Abigail, with the knife in her hand, was railing it into Matthew's chest.

'You did good.' The praise fell softly to Abigail's ears. She could barely hear it over the sound of blood pumping, her breath jagged as she stared down at the body still slumped in the chair. Blood pooled in his lap where she had forced her knife into his body. She'd killed a fucking alpha and it was *exhilarating.* She had done good. She'd done as Hannibal had asked. Watched Matthew, teased him with the possibility of closeness. A consolation prize because Will was so unwilling to see him as anything but a nuisance. They'd been using each other in a way, but she'd come out on top.

Her fingers were slippery with still-warm blood, she could smell the copper tang in the air. Hannibal was beside her, still as anything. He took the knife and pulled her close, deft hands

pressing to her skull. The grip was a comfort. His alpha scent calming her in the way her father's had. He would protect her, and she would protect him.

'Verger's using his old stables. They're derelict and it's private property. He's keeping Gabriel there. just while he waits for Will to figure things out. I was going to help Will. I was! I was going to take him there and help him.'

Matthew's final words rattled around her head, still in his voice. That slur. The way Hannibal had held him still in the chokehold as she'd pressed the blade tighter and tighter to his chest. He was thick with muscle but the blade was sharp; she liked the sound it made as it tore through muscle, how it was almost knocked out of her hands when she caught it on rib.

****

With the past now behind him, and Will counted every second of his time with Hannibal as the past, he threw himself into everything Alana had told him to. He pretended that he got a good night's sleep. He took his vitamins first thing in the morning. He ate breakfast. He drove out to a baby store and bought everything that the internet said he would need. His credit card took a battering, but he filled the back of his car up with boxes of furniture. He tried talking to his stomach but he just felt stupid, so he spoke to the dogs instead. Anything really, to avoid the discomforting ache in his chest.

Will bought a crib from a thrift store. He wanted something simple, something that he could work on. He took it apart, sanded the old wood down and finished it to a honey caramel. He'd do up the second bedroom as a nursery. His house had always felt so empty, but he was certain it would be better with a kid in it. Tiny feet rushing around the worn floorboards, giggling after the dogs.

He had the pieces of the crib laid out in the spare room. The dogs had followed him upstairs, and were sprawled in all the spare space they could find. The base was finished, but the fan of Winston's tail had displaced the screws beneath the fluffy rug he'd bought. He was scrabbling for them, dragging his palm over the floorboards when his phone rang from beneath wooden slats across the room. He sat up, stepping over stray bits of crib and sleeping dogs before he managed a hello.

'Will. It's Alana.' She sounded panicked. He frowned down at his half finished work as he took in her voice.

'Is everything okay?' He asked cautiously, phone crooked between his shoulder and ear as he scanned the floor for the screws. Most of them were still on the floor. He noticed one glinting in the blond strands of Winston's tale and grappled at him, pulling it free.

'Will. It's Mason. He's after you. He has…Will, I'm so sorry. He had me tell him *everything.*' Will felt confused for a few seconds before a ring of ice wrapped around his spine. He couldn't seem to connect the dots.

'How do you know Mason. *What?'* The jumble of confusion fell out all at once and he found himself swallowing thickly.

‘I’m married to his sister. I couldn’t tell you. We thought we could beat him at his own game, but he hurt her. Will, he’s hurt her irreparably and I can’t. I *had* to give it all up.’

‘Did you know who I was from our first session?’ He was stumbling down the stairs before he had a chance to take it all in, his dogs quickly following. He had to wonder, even if he feared the answer.

The hesitation wasn’t convincing. ‘I barely told him anything but then he hurt Margot. Then I said I’d help.’ She was crying down the phone, her voice shaking, and he could feel the panic fighting its way back again, after being calmed for only a few days.

‘You’ve been feeding him information about me. About the baby. About Hannibal?’ Will bit down into his tongue. A clear head was hard to find and he was scrambled, his vision blurring with blind panic.

‘Will. He has your son. He’s going to use him as punishment for what you did to Cordell.’

‘Uh.’ Will scrambled, holding onto the handle of his door. He thought his knees would give out. He was sure of it. ‘Where the fuck is he?’

‘I don’t know where he is,’ she said. ‘I swear I don’t know. I’m just…we’re just trying to survive him. This was our only way.’

‘Are you safe? You and your wife?’ He asked, pushing the dogs back when he opened the front door. They barked in frustration when they realised they were being left behind, but he hushed them as he slammed the door closed.

‘We’re safe. But you’re not. You need to call the cops, report a missing person for your son. Don’t do anything rash, Will. We can corroborate your story. You can’t go after him, not in your position.’

‘Stay the fuck out of this, Alana. Don’t fucking talk to me again.’ He hung up as he rapidly pressed the button to unlock his car. He took deep breaths right down into his lungs and tried to clear his head as he tore up the path away from his house.

Matthew would know where to find him.

That’s all Will could think about. God, he would bond himself to Matthew if he had to. To keep his son safe. Give himself over to Matthew and then they could take Mason down together. There would be no finesse, no clever planning. Matthew would know where to look but *Hannibal would know what to do.*

He tried to call Matthew as he drove away from Wolf Trap, but it was ringing straight through to voicemail. Will’s fingers shook on the wheel, blinking himself awake. The baby was kicking, in protest or comfort he wasn’t sure. He told himself to calm down, but it didn’t work. He knew where Matthew would be, but the threats he had spat at Hannibal, that Hannibal had spat right back rattled around his ears.

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Hannibal didn't like taking care of business in his own house ordinarily. Better to do it somewhere neutral where he was neither expected or known. Just as Will had kept a clean business for him, he kept a clean house. Only now he had the bloody corpse of an employee slumped into the chair, bleeding out onto the rug below.

Matthew had been good at his job. Violent and quick. More strategic in his violence than Tier, who could turn from a shy boy to feral animal at the drop of a hat. Hannibal wouldn't mourn a traitor like Matthew, but he would need replacing with someone just as brutal.

Abigail was still standing in the corner, shaking a little, but looking stronger as the moments passed. This had been good for her. She had proved herself cunning when the moment struck. She was more like Will than he had originally anticipated. Not ready just yet to take on anything else, but her promise had come good.

He was cleaning his own hands in the kitchen when there was a rumble from the foyer, the front door opening and closing. There was no one else around tonight, Hannibal had deliberately sent everyone home. But over the smell of blood was the sudden infiltration of Will's scent.

Hannibal wiped his hands dry and stood in front of the doorway, blocking Matthew's corpse for the moment, just as the door swung open. Will was standing there, gun cocked in his shaking hands. His hair was matted down to his face with sweat, his skin flushed with panic.

'Hello Will,' Hannibal said calmly, trying to ignore the parts of himself that wanted to grind his teeth and warn Will away. The plan was to fetch the boy and tell Will afterward, not involve him now.

'Where is he? Where's Matthew?' Will said. 'I need to see him.'

'He's here.' Hannibal stepped calmly aside, revealing Matthew's slumped corpse in the chair. He studied Will's expression, as his face fell and his features softened. He dropped his gun, his eyes sliding to Abigail. She had barely moved.

'No.' Will was shaking his head, hands moving up to tug on his hair. 'No no no. He has information.'

'We have that information,' Hannibal said calmly.

'My therapist told Mason everything,' Will said. His voice was far off, like he couldn't quite believe. He was pale beneath the flush and too out of it to fight off Hannibal's hands when he moved him to sit in a chair. He took the gun from his hands and placed it onto the table. 'He has Felix.'

'I know.' Hannibal crouched down, so that they were eyelevel. 'Abigail, go clean up and then call Tier. He'll take care of the rest of this.' The rest meant the body, and she understood that. She nodded her head, and he watched her eyes hesitating over Will before she left the room.

'Your son's name is Gabriel. He was selling MDMA at a club in Chicago. That's where Mason picked him up. For the time being he's safe.'

'Gabriel.' Wills voice was soft, his hand sliding to his face. 'That's what they called him?'

'Yes.' Hannibal tried to ignore how Will had skipped over the drug dealing part.

'I don't like it.'

'I'm not sure there's much to be done about that.' Hannibal soaked in the scent of Will, in how he was calm for just a few moments, revelling in the first news of his son in years. After a few moments, his eyes flickered up to meet Hannibal's, severe in their seriousness.

'We promised to stay away from each other I know, but I promise I'll do anything Hannibal. You have to help me get him to safety. He doesn't need to know who I am, but you have to help. You can have me or bond with me. You can have me or throw me to the wolves, just help me get him to safety.'

'I know where he is,' Hannibal said. 'I will not belittle you into suggesting you stay here but you're going to need to calm down. You'll need a clear head, can you do that, Will?' Hannibal's hand was on the back of Will's neck, pressing onto the pressure point to soothe.

'I can't promise anything,' Will said. 'Not until he's safe.'

Hannibal drove them alone in his Bentley. They had no back up, and they didn't have much of a plan either. They were no doubt being watched and were to be expected. They were silent at first, Will's breathing shallow until Hannibal told him to breathe in the scent. He held a wrist out, but Will refused it.

'Didn't we say we would kill each other if see saw one another again?' Will said quietly as Hannibal drove the car smoothly down a private track. He pulled up near a gate that Will would have to climb over, but then it was a short walk. Hannibal knew because he'd squeezed the information from Matthew a short hour beforehand. This was the easiest way onto Verger's property without being caught. 'You were going to take this kid from me when it comes of age.'

'A change in circumstance has rendered my feelings on the matter moot,' Hannibal said, hearing the humourless laugh Will gave and turning to smile at it. 'There will be time to talk about it at another point.'

'Right. Yeah.' Will cleared his throat, his eyes fluttering shut. Hannibal watched him try and gain his composure. After a few seconds, his eyes vivid and blue turned onto Hannibal. 'So what's the state of play?'

'You're going to need to go in alone,' Hannibal said. If Gabriel was nearby, then Verger wouldn't be too far away. It was likely he had already been warned that Will knew by his terrified therapist. He would be waiting for Will. Matthew would have made sure of that. 'You'll be a live hostage. Verger is easily distracted, and he'll want to preen once he has you. Don't try and look for the boy, I'll go in after you and get him to safety. Then I'll come and find you.'

‘A trade-off for the kid?’ Will was deliberately not using his son’s name. Hannibal supposed he was trying to detach in case they came face to face. ‘That doesn’t make any sense.’

‘This is much more about vengeance. He knows of this child’s true parentage.’ Hannibal’s eyes slid to the swell, covered by Will’s soft sweater. ‘This is payback for the both of us.’

Will’s head was in his hands the next time Hannibal looked over at him. ‘My therapist is married to his sister. I told her so much and she told him *everything.’*

‘Margot Verger. He recently had her sterilised to stop her inheriting on his name. He wants an heir, just as he did the last time you met. Punishment for you and for me.’

‘If I’d just kept my fucking mouth shut.’ Hannibal kept a hand on Will’s arm, not wanting to spook him but wanting him as calm as he could be. A dead-eyed and ruthless Will was the most dangerous creature, but he hadn’t been either of those things in months. Hannibal was struggling with the thought of sending his own pup into the arms of Verger’s rage, but for this to work he needed to douse the flames. Half of this would rest on Will. He just needed him calm. Needed him strategic.

‘He would have found out another way. Matthew had no doubt informed him of our intimacy.’

Will nodded his head. Hannibal wanted to move his hand up from Will’s knee, to feel where their child, so wanted now, was growing steadily. Hannibal could feel an ache in his chest again. It wasn’t the time to think on it. He watched Will for a little while longer, breathed in the familiar scent that had changed ever so slightly from before.

‘At least he can’t put a baby in me at the moment,’ Will said, rubbing furiously at his forehead. ‘I’m going to kill him.’

‘Yes,’ Hannibal said, certain of it. He just needed a push. ‘You should go. I’ll find your son while you find Mason.’

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Will could feel the blood pumping through his ears as he climbed the gate. It wasn’t as easy as it had been a few months ago with a baby balancing on his pelvis. Out of breath and with his heart racing so violently, he at least felt alive. Mason was always heavily guarded, worked on the basis that the more he had around him, the better protected he’d be. They didn’t work in unison, he knew that from previous experience.

Will need to pass through a wooded area, past the stables and then up a winding track to the main house. He’d barely passed the trees when he came across the first man, a beta wearing too much cologne. Will kept his footsteps soft, his hand reaching for the knife in his pocket. He pulled it out, flicking his wrist until the blade unsheathed. He needed to take out as many as he could before he was caught. The less men alive, the easier it would be to take down Verger.

He stabbed him in the back, the blade long and sharp enough. The man was taller, but his knees buckled in shock as Will yanked him back with one hand in his greasy hair. He cut his throat, the squirt of warm blood splashing him across the face. Will stepped back, wiping his eyes clear of blood as the body dropped to the ground in a gentle thud.

There were three more men in his path. The second was just as easy as the first. Will gutted him, the blade sharp enough that it sank into the taut belly with ease. He left him on the ground, blood pouring beneath his feet, his hands so slick with blood he had to wipe them off on his jeans.

The third was the hardest kill because he saw Will coming. He didn't shoot, which made Will realise that it was probably an order from Mason. He did smack Will across the temple with the butt of his gun and it sent Will onto his back, his ears ringing sharply as his vision blurred.

'Sir, he's here,' the man said into his jacket. He straddled Will who was still stunned from the pistol-whip across the face. His hands flew to Will's neck in a grappling throttle. He was trying to knock him out. He was crushing Will's abdomen with his weight and Will bared his teeth, watched the way something flickered in the man's eyes, something like fear at the expression on his face.

Will always carried more than one knife. His favourite was strapped to his hip and he couldn't grasp it with how the man was pinning him down. He was slick with blood though, and that made him slippery to keep a hold of. The man pinned Will down, adjusting his weight when he noticed the bump beneath Will's sweater. His wrists were held in a tight bound, nails biting into sensitive flesh.

'Bitches all the same,' he said, spitting down on Will's face. 'Verger's crazy if he wants your feral cunt around.'

He hovered, nostrils flaring, scenting Will. Will had enough purchase, enough insanity knocking about that he could lift his shoulders up, just enough that his mouth opened over the throat hovering above him. He bit down hard, yanking his head back as his teeth sunk behind his Adam's apple. Tendons tore, the grip immediately loosening as he was drenched in warm, squirting blood and other fluid. Will unlocked his jaw, headbutting the man's body over him, twisting until he was upright. He left him squirming, hands closing over the wound in his throat. Will was coated, layered with blood. He touched his stomach briefly, and then pulled his holstered knife from the sheath as he took in a deep breath.

He planned on walking onwards, past the stables and down the path that he knew lead to Mason's house. It was where the alpha would be waiting for him, but he felt an invisible tug, somewhere behind his navel. It had him turning to his left, to the stables.

Will stumbled to his feet, spitting blood that wasn't his. He felt wet all over, blood coating his skin, his hair. His clothes felt heavy with it. His breathing was audible, but he didn't care. He could see the stables in front of him, with no other guard in sight. His feet dragged him over to the stables before his mind could catch up. *My son. My son. My kid. Gabriel.* The name was wrong. It was all fucking *wrong*.

There was no guard on the door, presumably because he had just torn the throat out of the closest one. The door was padlocked shut, but he jimmied his knife beneath the bolt, throwing as much heft into it as he could until the metal gave way against the hinge. The rest was easy. He plied it open with blood-slick fingers, his gasping breaths coming thick and fast as he finally opened the door. He heard a yell from behind the door and hesitated briefly. Their last time together, Will had been fifteen and Gabriel had been newly born.

'Leave me the *fuck* alone!'

Gabriel was standing in the furthest corner of the stall, chained by his ankles to the frame at the back. Will tried to focus on that rather than the fully realised shape of his son, his beautiful kid that he hadn't seen in so many years.

'I'm here to help.' Will raised his hands flat in the air, unable to stop how they shook. When he saw how slick they were, almost black with blood, he wiped them off on his jeans again. *I hope he doesn't know who I am.*

'Help? You're covered in blood. Oh god. Oh god. Look I didn't know who your boss was, alright? I was just having fun. I was told he wanted molly. I didn't know anything else.' Gabriel's voice was flooding Will's brain with something. Chemicals; biology. His alpha son.

'We need to go,' Will said, chancing a look at Gabriel. It was hard to see in the darkness, but he thought there was a likeness. Gabriel was more solid than Will had ever been, but his hair fell in the same messy way, and there was a familiarity in his nose too. When Will realised he was looking too much, he cast his eyes down. Didn't want the kid catching a glimpse of their similarities. Hannibal was supposed to be dealing with this.

'Who the fuck are you and why the fuck are you covered in blood?' He kept his wrists tight even when Will tore through the zip tie with the flick of his blade. He handed the blade over to the boy, letting him clutch it in his hands before he stood back.

'Hold onto the knife. I'm here to help.' Will moved behind Gabriel, ignoring how the boy tried to keep space between them, tripping on the heavy chain. His clothes were filthy, there was a blackening shadow over one of his eyes and he smelled sour. He had been here a while; waiting for Will to catch on. Another wave of fury came over him at the sight of his kid. 'Someone is waiting for us.'

'Yeah? Well I don't fucking talk to strangers.' Will grabbed at the chain. It was bolted with a padlock to the frame. Will's knife wouldn't be much use with this one. He could shoot it off, but he'd left his gun back at Hannibal's. The men outside, dead in their own blood, they had guns. They hadn't shot at him, but they would all be packing. Will turned, keeping his distance from Gabriel. He didn't want to scare the kid.

'Wait – where are you going? Don't fucking leave me here.' All bravado slipped away at Gabriel's panicked tone. Will turned to look at him, smiled and then wished he hadn't. It seemed to scare Gabriel more.

'I need a gun or some bolt cutters. I'm coming back,' Will said. Gabriel didn't seem to know who he was, and that was good, that was a relief. Will's heart was pumping so much blood he

could feel himself becoming lightheaded, his vision narrowing, but he tried to focus. Tried to make sense. He turned, ignoring how the room span. He was certain he heard Gabriel shout out before the smell of another alpha filled his lungs and his face collided with something hard, his vision fading.

'Mr Graham, so pleased you could join us.'

Will heard the voice stirring through his mind as his eyes blinked open. He jolted when he remembered the stables, remembered Gabriel terrified and chained up like a dog. Will tried to move but realised he was now sitting on a sturdy chair, his legs tied to the wooden ones, his wrists bound behind his back. In the corner, Gabriel was sitting hunched to the floor, shaking, one of Verger's men standing behind him.

Mason came into view. Tall, black coat, leather gloves. That alpha scent. Will rarely felt like he had no power in violent situations, but tied to a chair with his son chained up, Will felt utterly powerless.

'Now do I need to muzzle you? You've been in the habit of taking bites out of my men and I'd like you to stop.'

'Maybe they shouldn't get so close then.' Will looked around. His face felt sticky rather than wet with blood, which meant it had started to dry. He could feel it heavy in his hair, on the ends of his eyelashes.

'Now you must tell me! Did you truly kill Cordell with his fingers still in your cunt? *My honeypot.* You were supposed to be mine.' There was a dramatic tilt to his tone, as his eyes dragged down Will's body.

'You don't want me like that, Mason. You and I both know that,' Will said, thinking to Matthew who did want him. To Hannibal, whose pup was growing in his belly. Shit, maybe his dad had been right all those years ago about him.

Mason approached, all swagger in his black coat. His excitement radiated in the timbre of his voice. He felt he had something over Will. He leaned down, so they were eye level but far enough away from the viciousness of Will's mouth.

'I wanted a child from you, true. Looks like Lecter got there before me.' His gloved finger stroked down the small swelling of Will's stomach. Will breathed slow, feeling his shoulders stagger with the breath. 'Oh you could make me a godparent. I was, of course, involved in the process. You're the type of careful bitch on birth control I'm sure. Didn't plan on making a daddy out of Hannibal just yet.'

'Don't plan on making a father out of anyone,' Will said, eyes sliding to Mason's bouncing hair rather than anywhere else in the room. Still, from his peripheral he could see Gabriel standing in the corner, shaking like the child he was.

'A little late for that, surely. I need an heir, Mr Graham. When I discovered you'd been knocked up I had my suspicions it was Lecter's but I had to make sure. He owes me. He *owns*

you and I owned Cordell, you see? An employee for an employee is only fair. If he won't allow me to use your services.'

'My services.' Will swallowed thickly, shoulder pinned tightly as Mason threw an arm over his shoulder, the other hand still resting over his stomach. 'If you want sex you can get that anywhere. You really wouldn't want it with me.'

'Probably not. Though, I could be persuaded.' Teeth against his ear, sharp and jagged. Will could feel his blood pumping, panic swelling up. He thought about how Hannibal was waiting for them outside, how he hadn't bloodied his hands for such a long time. He thought to Gabriel in the corner, hearing all of this and not having a clue who Will was.

'Mason, what do you want?' Will asked. He remembered the first time he had stood face to face with Hannibal off his suppressants, how he'd succumbed to basic instinct, eyes dilating, breathing in the rich comfort of an alpha. How he'd tried to bare his neck, how Hannibal had caressed it before straightening it again. How he'd pulled through it. Somehow. Hannibal had shown him the strength to not submit at a whim. Not to give in just because his body wanted it.

'You omegas never listen.' A gentle slap on the cheek. A scuffle and a cough from the corner of the room. Will looked over to see Gabriel watching the two of them, a scruff of a frown folding over his brow. 'I told you I want an heir. Your savagery is the best I've seen. And you're clearly incredibly fertile.'

'Your poison didn't put it inside me,' Will reminded him. 'I know Alana told you it's Hannibal. I know you had her spitting stories about me. You wanna fight him for parental rights you take it up with him. I could care less.'

'Or why wait for this bundle of joy to arrive when I could just take another? I'll have to thank her *beyond words* for granting me access to your dirtiest secret of all,' Verger said, waving one hand in the air to the darkness. Will frowned at him, shoulder aching beneath the bruising grip. 'How are you doing, Gabriel?'

'Mason, let him go,' Will wasn't above begging, not now. His eyes skipped over to Gabriel looking confused and terrified in the corner and back up at Mason. 'Keep him out of this. He's just a kid.'

'The boy was looking to sell, and well, I was looking for him once dear Dr Bloom told me all about him. Conceived in the boatyards of Louisiana. Delightful. Found him dealing blow in Chicago.'

'It wasn't blow, you motherfucker. It was just molly. And I wasn't dealing, not really. Just the once.' Will desperately wanted to tell Gabriel to shut up, that he didn't want to hear his long-lost son was dealing drugs or getting himself into any more trouble.

'Motherfucker?' Verger howled, pressing Will close. 'Almost Gabriel. I almost was.' Will tried to blink back the tears that rose up from the ache inside. He felt the wet slide as a few escaped, Verger pressed a thumb into his eye socket with his gloved hand. Better that than his tongue.

‘Wait, what?’ Gabriel sounded confused, but Will had to wilfully ignore the sudden staring he received, focusing on Mason instead.

‘What do you want?’ Will asked. ‘Leave him out of this. Fuck. Leave him the hell out of this.’

‘You have a choice to make. I get one of your children. I get it as revenge for Cordell. I get it for revenge against Lecter. I get it because I want it, because you’re an omega and you have to do what I say. I’ll only bite you otherwise.’

‘Go fuck yourself,’ Gabriel interrupted. ‘I want to go home.’

‘He wants to go home.’ Verger’s voice was a sick purr against Will’s cheek. He tried to tear his eyes away from Gabriel, who in the poor lighting held shadows of familiarity against his own features. His scent was warming, Will could just about pick it out over the heavy sourness of Mason’s which was clouding his lungs and keeping him in place. ‘Wants to be far away from you.’

‘Let him go, Mason,’ Will said. ‘Whatever you want I’ll do it. Let him go, he’s just a kid.’

‘If I let him go then this one gets it.’ There was something glinting in Mason’s hand. Will noticed it, unable to move as the flat blade pressed against his stomach.

‘You kill his kid and he’ll kill you,’ Will said, suddenly fearful. He’d never cared much for his life, but the last few months had felt different. He needed to be around for Abigail, who had just killed a man; for this child, who without him would grow up just as he had. He looked over to Gabriel. His mouth was moving but Will couldn’t hear the words with the way the blood was pumping. He needed to be around for him too.

‘Lecter’s pup is bound to be an alpha. I’d let you be in his life, you know. I wouldn’t want you to abandon this one. We could raise it together. From Lecter’s bloodhound to my bitch. We could try for one of our own. I’d like a set. Imagine *twins*.’ His hands moved, so the flat of his palm rested against his stomach and the blade moved to his throat. ‘Papa taught me all the ways to be a true father.’

‘You’re fucking crazy.’ Gabriel’s voice carried over. Will looked over to his…son. He was a sickly colour and shaking so much he looked close to passing out. Will wanted to tear out of the binds and take him out of here, put him on a plane back to Chicago and pray that he never had to get involved with Will’s life again. He hoped someone would know. The guard standing beside Gabriel seemed to pick up a cue from Verger because his brass knuckled fist swept across Gabriel’s temple in a seemingly gentle clip, the boy falling silent.

‘Don’t you fucking touch him,’ Will said, watching the blood drip down his son’s temple as his head lulled onto his chest, silenced by his unconsciousness.

‘One more strike and your choice is made for you. If he’s dead, then I get this one. And you.’ Verger’s eyes were dark, overcome with the alpha aggression that could easily turn into something more insidious. A rut wouldn’t do anything to Will in his current situation, particularly not when he was carrying another man’s pup. ‘Or you let me keep Gabriel, raise

him as part of the family. Two alphas messes with the status quo and my sister's ovaries are gone, but I'm sure her wife's *are just fine.* That wouldn't quite be an heir, of course, but it would be suitable punishment for you, I think.'

'He's a kid.'

'Well that hardly stopped you, did it, Mr Graham?'

There was a thud from outside the building. Will heard it, and so did the guard who was still standing over Gabriel's crumpled body. The man poked Gabriel with his toe and when he didn't move, he left the barn to investigate outside. Verger was still pacing, too excited with his alpha-lust to hear anything above his own voice.

'Was it good to see him at least? I bought you back together after you gave him up so willingly.'

'Shut up.' Will closed his eyes, trying to block it out. He couldn't think about him. His son. *Gabriel.* Not a name Will would have given him. Not the name Will *had* given him. This wasn't the reunion he had anticipated. The one he had dreamed of. The one that couldn't happen because the life Will lead was not one he was willing to share with someone innocent.

Will heard the drop of a body from outside the building. Will breathed in the perfumed air and his blood started to rush. *At last.* 'You have a choice to make, Mr Graham. What kid do you want to live? The other dies.'

'You kill the one inside me and then I die. What's the fun in that?'

'I wouldn't be performing the surgery myself.' Mason laughed, leaning in close before he was reminded of Will's tendency to bite when provoked. 'I'll take it. I'll kill it and nurse you back to health. Like a good alpha should.' The thought of being nursed back to health by anyone, let alone Mason, was enough to make Will's stomach churn. He felt close to passing out, the way everything was racing, but he couldn't. *Wouldn't.* 'Make the choice, Will.'

The knife rested against his stomach again. He could feel the baby kicking, maybe it could feel Will's distress. In the corner of his eyeline, Gabriel shifted. Will closed his eyes, even when Mason grabbed at his jaw, his leather-clad fingers sliding through the blood coating his face.

'Give me an answer.'

Mason stepped back from Will, changing tact, and turned instead toward Gabriel. The boy looked dazed, the gash on his temple pouring blood as he tried to gain his footing. Will could hear the noises coming from his mouth, but not the words. All he could see was the knife in Mason's hand and the way he was striding over to Gabriel.

Then there was a shadow in the doorway, and that familiar perfumed scent. Will blinked, turning his head to see Hannibal standing in the archway. He was soaked with blood, almost as much as Will was. He had a gun in his hand, but he dropped it to the ground, distracting Mason who turned to face him.

‘Mason, what have you gotten yourself into?’ Hannibal said, chiding him and sounding only slightly out of breath. Will tried to move, tried to twist his hands but all he could feel was delicate skin tearing in the binds, wetting with blood.

Mason went to open his mouth, but what came out was a pitched cry. He was blocking Gabriel from view, but when he stumbled to the side Will saw that his son had moved a few inches forward and shoved the switchblade Will had handed him into Mason’s back. Hannibal moved quick, hands outstretched to grip Mason’s wrists and twisting them until he cried out and dropped the blade he’d been wielding.

Hannibal was older, but more physical. Verger thrived on chaos alone, which made him unpredictable but vulnerable. It took a bit of adjusting but Hannibal’s hands moved from Mason’s wrists, until he held him in a tight grip, elbow pressing into sternum. Beneath the struggled sounds of Mason’s desperate wriggling to get free, Will could hear Gabriel’s panicked breaths. Hannibal just looked at Will, and Will looked back, staring and staring until Mason finally stopped writhing.

‘It’s okay,’ Hannibal said, eyes moving to Gabriel even when he stepped closer to Will. He let go of Mason, letting his body fold to the floor at Will’s feet. ‘You’re both safe now.’

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Technically Will was on forced bedrest. The baby was stressed, or Will was so stressed and dehydrated and his blood pressure was so high that they wanted to keep him in indefinitely. He was washed clean of blood, and all the cuts on his body were stitched up by a friendly doctor that Will refused to speak to. The police didn’t come right away, which was testament of Hannibal’s sway and how hard he was working. When they did arrive, it was brief. He was informed of what happened and signed the ready-made statement without a second thought.

It was his fault. He should have chased Mason down like originally planned and ignored Gabriel in the stable. If he’d have done that, Hannibal would’ve been able to extract the boy himself. If he’d have done that then he wouldn’t have been tied to a chair and made to pick between his two children, wouldn’t have needed his son to butcher Verger, or Hannibal to finish the job. He’d have gained so much more satisfaction being the one to end Mason.

Will had to swallow the thoughts down as he sat in a stiff chair beside his son’s hospital bed. It was hard reconciling the last image he had of his son, freckle-faced and gap-toothed, to the one laid out on the hospital bed now. There was a shadow of a purpling bruise against his jaw and a freshly stitched gash sitting across his left brow bone where the brass knuckles had split him open. It’d scar; a silver thread cutting through the dark of his eyebrows. He noticed an old scar over the bridge of his nose, and he wondered how that had happened. Was he comforted the way Will would have comforted him?

Will wanted to push his hair back, the hair that curled like his own, but he didn’t dare. The scent of his alpha son was so strong that he could do nothing but take the scent of it down into his lungs. He curled his fingers around his hand, broad and smooth. When the fingers shifted, Will dropped them, tucking his hands down to his knees.

They had the same eye colour, but Gabriel's were a different shape. Will was close to folding his glasses over his own when Gabriel just cleared his throat and smiled a little.

'So like, just to get it out of the way, you're my mom, right? Or dad? Whatever one.'

There were words Will thought he should say to that question, more precise, more careful but in the end, he went a simple, 'Yes.'

'That guy really hated you. Why?' Gabriel's eyes studied him for a moment, enough that Will felt like the top layer of his skin was burning off.

'He thought I needed to be punished,' Will said. 'How are you feeling, Gabriel? What you witnessed was awful. I'm so sorry you were put in that situation.'

'It's Gabe. Only my grandparents call me *Gabriel.* I have a headache, but that's it really.' Gabe reached his hand up, fingers brushing his bruised forehead before he flinched at the touch. 'It's fine. It's self-defence. That's what the cops said when they came to see me. I don't think cops are supposed to tell you that, but this is one of those situations where I just don't ask, right?'

'That's for the best.' Will was relieved Hannibal had seen to Gabriel's protection. He was also the reason the boy's next of kin hadn't been called, he'd forced the staff to hold off until after Will had spoken to him. He knew that, and he hadn't seen Hannibal since the EMT's took them away. 'Do you want me to call your family? Your dad? They'll probably be worried.'

'Nah. It's alright.' Gabe closed his eyes for a few moments, but his mouth twitched as he looked somewhere over Will's shoulder. 'Unless you want to call them?'

'No, but I should.' Will licked his lips. The hospital room was dry with the aircon and it made his skin feel tight. 'I have no idea what I'm doing. I just thought you'd probably want to see him. He might be worried.'

'He was never that interested in me. I felt like an inconvenience, but he has a family. Two kids with his wife.' There was a bravado to his tone that revealed the bitterness beneath. Will had heard it in Abigail on occasion, he figured that it came with youth. 'They said you didn't want me. That you weren't even sure I was dad's so they did a test to make sure.'

'I did want you, but it was complicated. I was a kid and—' Will paused, wondering if there was really any point telling the story. It was his pain, and he didn't want to put it on the kid. 'I didn't think I'd ever be able to see you again.'

Gabe nodded his head, his eyes up at the ceiling. At seventeen, he had started to broaden. Stuck in that awkward place between kid and young adult. They sat in silence for a while. Will hoped his scent was soothing to him, that it helped.

'That alpha with the accent that killed the psycho– he did this to you?' Gabriel's eyes fell to Will's stomach as he changed the subject. 'Is he your boyfriend?'

The idea of Hannibal being classed as anyone's boyfriend made Will balk slightly and laugh only a little. He covered it with a cough. 'Technically he's my boss. Or he was before he fired me.'

'That's kind of messed up.'

'Yeah.' Will didn't take offence because it was, and he was used to Abigail calling him out on it. He remembered his promise to Hannibal. How they had promised to kill each other. He wasn't sure where they stood now.

'Do you have any others?' Gabriel asked and Will looked at him confused for a moment before he suddenly realised what he was asking. *Any others that you kept.*

'No. It's just you and this one.' Will felt like he'd said the wrong thing. Gabe wasn't really his. Not in the ways that mattered. 'I'm so sorry that you got mixed-up in this.'

'It's okay.' The shrugged shoulder would have looked a lot more aloof if Gabe didn't look so young. 'I probably shouldn't try and sell molly to psychos.'

'Is that something you do a lot?'

'Not really. I was just bored and wanted some extra cash.' Gabe smiled and it pulled at his face in the same way Will's did. It was still so unnerving to see some of his own features reflected. Made him think of the baby growing inside him, and what muddled selection they would inherit.

'I'm sure you're aware of the kind of man I am, I'm not a good one. What I do. What Hannibal does. I don't want you getting mixed up in it. But uh if you'd like we could get coffee, or I don't know. I don't know what kids like.'

'I'd like that.' There was something so honest on Gabe's face that set Will's heart to break a little. 'I want to get mixed up with you.'

'Okay.' Will smiled. His lips pursed tight. He thought he'd explode otherwise. 'But I uh. I should probably call your grandparents. We can only put them off so long.'

It was only because Will had been in enough shitty situations over the years that it wasn't the most awkward phone call he'd ever had, but it wasn't great. Their grandson was in the hospital and Will was getting all the blame. He left out the part about Gabe dealing MDMA. They were mad enough.

Hannibal was sitting in the room that Will was supposed to be occupying when he finally came back. His body was stiff, his eyes looked shadowed and puffy. He gave Will a customary *annoyed that he wasn't in bed* look.

'Mason wanted me to choose which child should die. And I knew. I knew what child I would save,' Will said, touching Hannibal's face gently. They hadn't really spoken. Not about what had happened. Not about anything really. It seemed as good a time as any to discuss. Will wasn't going anywhere any time soon.

‘Gabriel,’ Hannibal answered quietly. ‘You’re a man of logic, Will. Saving Gabriel in that moment would buy you extra time. He couldn’t remove this child while you were strapped to the chair.’

‘I think I knew that you would get to us. I’m sorry that I deviated from the plan.’ Will looked away, but then forced himself to stare back at Hannibal’s worn and tired expression. He put his arms over Hannibal’s shoulders and pulled him in until he could feel his face pressed to his neck. ‘You need to relax.’

Hannibal did relax a little bit. Will was stuck deep in thought, thoughts about taking Hannibal home with him. Of making sure he knew that Will was so utterly thankful. Not sex. Something else. He wanted to pull him out of his suits and put him in his nest and look after him until he realised.

‘Will, are you okay?’ Will stirred from the daydream to see Hannibal staring at him. His suit was crumpled from the hug, his hair no longer swept back. Will liked it softer, it reminded him of Christmas, of those mornings in bed where everything had been a little easier.

‘Weird omega thoughts, I think,’ Will said. ‘How’s Abigail?’

Hannibal said she was fine and that she was desperate to see Will. He had shut her out over the last couple of months to protect her from this mess with Hannibal, but she had killed a man now, and he couldn’t not see her through that anguish. In return, Will filled him in on Gabe. That on the surface he was mostly unfazed about his role in Mason’s death, the kidnapping, but Will was sure it would come out later. Mostly that he still wanted to see Will again, even though this was nearly all his fault.

‘And you?’ Hannibal’s eyes slid down, only an inch, but enough. The state Will was in hadn’t been forgotten. He’d been reminded over and over. An omega needed to be protected, to be coddled. He bit at the tip of his tongue until he felt the swelling of blood.

‘Fine. We’re fine.’ He swallowed down the blood. Between the silence, where Hannibal was quiet enough that Will knew he wasn’t satisfied with the answer and Will was still burning through the feeling of having his kid back, half in his life, if he wanted it. Wondered if it was possible to have everything. An Alpha that didn’t suffocate him. Children that came back to him. A career that quelled that dark violence always ready to overspill.

‘Thank you.’ Neither were comfortable sitting in platitudes and Will could sense Hannibal’s discomfort as he stood up, straightening his tie where Will had jostled it. Will stepped closer, resting his hands on Hannibal’s shoulders. ‘I promised you that we could bond if you helped.’

‘Will, your loyalty has been proven.’ Cool hands cupped his face as he stepped into Will’s personal space, long fingers curling over his cheekbones. Will stared up at him, looking for something hidden, something that suggested Hannibal was holding back, but he couldn’t sense anything else. His heart started to slow from the anxiety. ‘When you’re ready we can discuss how to proceed.’

‘I’m not moving in with you. I have the dogs and I like my house. You have too many alphas around and I’m not mating. Not yet. We can’t until my next heat anyway.’ Will’s voice

stumbled halfway through, thick with uncertainty as he cleared his throat.

‘And yet I sense a but,’ Hannibal offered, one hand leaving Will’s face to slide down over Will’s soft flannel shirt, his bump pressing tight to the fabric. Will allowed the touch but didn’t let it distract him from what he was trying to say.

‘I like how I feel with you. It fits when it shouldn’t and I like that even though it terrifies me. I trust you and I don’t trust anyone. I don’t know. Are we too old to date? Could we do that? Do you want that?’

‘Dating has always seemed an archaic notion to me. Either you’re invested enough to pursue a person seriously or you’re not.’ Hannibal was getting caught up in his words again, but Will allowed it, focusing in on the warm flush that was creeping up Hannibal’s neck. ‘I’m invested enough in you to want to do as you wish.’

‘That’s not very romantic.’

‘You are not swayed by romance.’

‘No, I’m not,’ Will admitted, stepping away when he felt the atmosphere thicken unbearably. ‘We can’t *date* date anyway. I think they’re having me committed here indefinitely. I’m unbonded and I don’t have a psychiatrist anymore, so I’m stuck.’

‘You say committed as if it was in a psychiatric sense.’ Hannibal said. Will noticed how his body language had changed suddenly. He was standing broad, hands in his pockets as he took to staring out of the window. There was the smallest of smiles on his face, just enough that Will picked up on it. ‘You need the rest, Will. That’s all.’

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Abigail looked whitewashed when she came to visit him. Her hair pulled back from her face; her hands bunched up into the sleeves of her sweater. Will was sitting on the bed, refusing to lay back because he didn’t know how. People kept bringing him flowers or bags of fruit like he was actually sick. Really he just wanted to be at home with his dogs.

‘I thought it would feel different. I thought I would feel changed, but I don’t. I feel better. Is it wrong?’ Abigail was looking out of the window, pulling on the petals from the flimsy bouquet of flowers Franklyn had bought him.

‘Probably,’ Will said. His mind was flooded with Matthew with his guts spilled out over Hannibal’s dining room. That felt like such a long time ago now, he was having trouble even recalling the man’s face. ‘I know how it feels. So does Hannibal. So you’re not alone in it either way.’

‘I heard about Dr Bloom,’ she said instead. ‘I always thought she was annoying but nice.’

‘She is nice, she was just caught up.’

‘So you forgive her?’

‘No, I don’t forgive her. I just understand why she did it.’ Abigail grew a notch between her eyebrows as she frowned at him. When she opened her mouth to argue her point, he gave her enough of a look that she closed it again.

‘Why didn’t you tell me you had a son.’

‘Because I’ve never made a habit of telling people. It was out of my control. All of it.’

‘And now? Is he sticking around?’

‘He won’t replace you as a pain in my ass,’ he said, waiting for the smile and sag in shoulders as she lost the tension. ‘But I hope so.’

They spoke about safe topics that didn’t include his accidental pregnancy, the kidnapping of his long-lost son, or the fact that she helped Hannibal murder Matthew in his dining room. She talked instead about how she was finally going back to college, her feet swinging on the bed beside him.

‘Working in the art gallery is so dull, Will. And you’re going to be too busy wrist deep in diapers to help me through the other stuff. I’ll go back to college and see where I end up in a couple of years. I think I’ll be a better asset for Hannibal the other side of it.’

‘You’re more than just an asset to him,’ Will assured her, tired of always being the one to placate her, but knowing that she needed it now more than ever.

‘I know,’ she said, looking up at him with her blue eyes, wide and bright.

Will was antsy to leave, but he was under strict instructions to stay in his hospital bed. He was certain the doctor on duty was *another* on Hannibal’s wage list, which made escaping harder. Plus, he was there for the kid in his belly, trying to grow despite Will’s apparent disregard. And the kid on the youth ward. He was there for him too. Will had been to see him earlier in the day, sat with him and listened to him talk and watched his face, and his movements, and anticipated the dreaded moment he was taken away from him again.

The door flew open just as he was setting his feet down to the floor, readying to take another slow walk around his room. He looked up to see Alana standing in the doorway. She looked a mess. Her long dark hair pulled back; the blue of her eyes offset by the red encircling them. Her cheeks seemed hollowed rather than flushed, giving a withdrawn appearance.

‘Well you look even worse than I feel,’ he said, not meeting her eyes. There was anger beneath the surface at her betrayal, but he found it flattened by something else. Maybe he was too tired. ‘Why did you do it? Did he pay you?’

‘His sister is my wife. All the things I know he planned to do to you, well they’re not far away from the things he’d had done to her,’ she said. She pulled the chair from beside the bed and sat in it cautiously, as if she were afraid of his reaction.

‘How long were you feeding him information about me?’

‘It wasn’t like that.’

‘It’s why you kept asking me about Hannibal being the father, isn’t it? He needed confirmation before he could act.’ Will felt it swallowing him up. All those things he had confessed to her about his son. All the stuff he hadn’t told anyone. His feelings regarding Abigail. His feelings for Hannibal. *Fuck*. ‘This is why I don’t fucking trust therapists. It’s why I don’t trust anyone. How bad is the HIPAA violation? I could get you struck off for this.’

‘Will.’ Her voice was thin, almost shaky. ‘I didn’t have a choice. When he found out—’

‘It’s fine.’ He rubbed at his forehead, hard enough that he knew he’d stained it pink. It wasn’t fine, it would never be fine but Alana was a victim. It had been foolish of him to let his walls down in the first place. ‘I know you didn’t have a choice.’

‘They found a lot of dead men on the farm, Will. The police say it was self-defence, but I’m not so sure.’

‘I don’t know what happened,’ Will said, because the nightmares he had about having to pick between his two children would stay in his own private hell for now. ‘You know, you don’t have to feel guilty. You don’t have to feel obliged to seek me out. We’re not friends, and you’re certainly *not* my therapist anymore. Just go be with your wife.’

‘You deserve to be happy, Will. Whatever that means to you.’

‘I don’t know. Maybe I’m getting my shit together. Hannibal and I have come to a truce.’ Will shook his head. He was too tired to fight it. All he wanted was a locked room with Hannibal where he could just hide his face in his neck and *breathe.* ‘But we’re having a kid and that changes things.’

‘And your son. He’s okay?’

‘No thanks to you.’ He realised when he said it where the anger truly lay. His anger at her putting Gabe in the line of fire. A kid that was better off never knowing Will, but who was now well and truly involved. Who knew exactly what Will was capable of and didn’t seem put off at all. How had helped kill Mason by plunging a knife into his back.

He cleared his throat when he saw her wipe at her eyes. He wasn’t sure if it was pity at herself or him. ‘I’m gonna be okay. You gotta make sure you’re okay. I can’t do that for you.’

Will had this nurse overseeing him in the hospital. His job seemed to consist of making sure he at least stayed in his room, if he wasn’t going to stay in bed. The room was nice enough, Will was just glad he wasn’t having to share a ward with excitable pregnant omegas who all did a better job than him at being serene and pregnant.

The nurse was bonded. Around Will’s age, a little older perhaps. Will stared at his scarred throat as he adjusted the drip in Will’s arm. He seemed friendly enough, and only made a

handful of sarcastic comments regarding the general state of Will's health.

'Do you like being bonded?' Will asked when he had more blood drawn from his arm. He hadn't wanted to ask anything, but he realised he'd never actually asked the question to another omega before.

'It has its uses,' the nurse smiled at him. He'd probably already met Hannibal, who spent most evenings here with Will, always leaving in a much better mood than when he arrived.

'We never wanted that kind of attachment from each other but now I'm not sure.' He rested his fingers lightly over his bump, hidden beneath the blankets. 'I don't want to add it to the list of things I end up regretting in life.'

'You've been through a lot, Will. That makes you strong as hell. Strong people can survive anything life throws at them. It might be a relief for you to realise you don't have to fight the world alone.' Will thought he might have learned his lesson there. He could still see Hannibal stepping through the doors of the stable, how he stared at Will as he stole the breath from Mason's lungs.

'How could I be stronger if I had him in my head?'

'It isn't like that. It's a comfort. It's a quiet understanding of knowing what the other wants without speaking a word.' Will watched the expression soften on the nurse's face. Will refused to learn names. To learn names was with the expectation that he'd be staying longer, and he didn't want that.

'Do you have kids?' Will asked, deciding to file the information away for another time. If he wanted that with Hannibal, he didn't have to think about it for a good while at least.

'Two.'

'Me too,' Will said, because he could now. Gabe wanted him around. The name would still take some getting used to, but then so would being a parent. 'Or almost I guess.'

'I can't imagine you with my dad.'

Gabe was ready to be picked up. His grandparents were finally flying down from Chicago to take him home. They had been busy, too caught up to fetch him before now. Will had opinions regarding that, which he kept to himself. Instead, they sat outside the hospital's main entrance, on a bench just across from the bus stop. It was probably farther than Will was supposed to go, but no one had dragged him back inside yet.

'Well it wasn't…we weren't together. Not really,' Will said, looking down as Gabe lit a cigarette, inhaling deep. Probably shouldn't do that. Hannibal would *definitely* have something to say if he realised. And he would realise, later.

'You smell really good. Must be because you're my omega parent,' Gabe said, and then when Will caught the flush rising on his cheeks, he shrugged a casual shoulder. 'Are you gonna

mate with Hannibal?'

'Not for a while.' Will gestured to his stomach, hidden half by his coat. Gabe looked down at it and there was a moment where the pensive look on his face seemed so much like a mirrored reflection of Will's own.

'He's alright for an old alpha.'

'He isn't that old,' Will laughed but maybe he was to a kid. 'He's just old fashioned.'

'Eccentric. He made any possibility of an arrest go away.' Gabe's cheeks hollowed as he inhaled. He inched closer until they were elbow to elbow. Will felt a sudden relish, something that made heat and protectiveness curl in his chest. *His child.* 'Seems like he'd trip over his own knot to make you his.'

'Yeah.' Will didn't think he really had the right to ask Gabe to not say shit like that to him. Instead he took his half-finished cigarette and crushed it beneath his foot. 'You shouldn't smoke these. They're bad for you.'

Gabe laughed, a sweet gentle noise. It made something soar in Will again, deep in his chest. 'Can I come back and see you after the baby's born?'

'I'd like that,' Will said. He remembered Alana saying something to him once about how he was forging a bond between his two children simply by them both being born. Now it felt more real than ever. 'If you're not still grounded.'

'Right,' he laughed. 'You, uh. You didn't tell them about the drug stuff, did you?'

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Will's forced bedrest made things a little easier for Hannibal. He was able to focus on dealing with the fall out within his own team and outside, before spending the evenings in the hospital. He lined the pockets of the homicide department, who helped cover any loose threads but there really wasn't much to lie about. A young boy had been kidnapped and held hostage; a pregnant omega had attempted a botched rescue and almost died for it. Hannibal had been forced to defend the parent of his unborn child. Mason's viciousness was renowned, and his death was of no real loss to the Maryland community. Hannibal had found his own precarious seating on the board of councillors a little off balance, but he had smoothed things over. As he always did.

'I hope they're not for me,' Will said later that evening, eyeing the lavish garland of flowers blooming from Hannibal's hands, wrapped in fine tissue paper. A Russian florist that Hannibal always used, and *not* from the hospital gift shop.

He looked better than he had the night before, although he clearly wasn't sleeping. Hannibal was having trouble in that regard too. Nightmares had become reality on a few days prior. Will smelled calmer, he smelled almost happy. The flowers complimented his natural scent, which had been one of the reasons Hannibal had chosen this arrangement. He placed them on the windowsill, brightening up the clinical glass.

‘How do you feel?’ he asked, taking three strides over to the bed and pushing Will’s hair back to cup his forehead. His temperature was normal. Hannibal had spoken to the doctor already, knew that Will had been forced back into bed three times when he had gone wandering. Knew that his blood pressure was still high, and unlikely to come back down unless he really started taking care of himself. Hannibal was an alpha, and he was paying for Will’s treatment, it allowed him access otherwise unauthorised.

‘Said goodbye to Gabe. He wants to see me again for real,’ Will responded, clearly avoiding Hannibal’s questioning. ‘And Dr Bloom came to see me.’

‘How did it go?’ their eyes met, and Hannibal felt a burning sensation in his chest. Matthew’s betrayal had been so wrapped up in his obsessive love for Will, but Will hadn’t seen his therapist’s disloyalty coming at all.

‘I think we said all that was needed to be said. Mason left behind a lot of collateral damage.’ Will was sitting on the edge of the bed, but he patted the spot beside him. Hannibal unbuttoned his jacket, pulling his arms from it and draping it to the end of the bed before taking a careful seat beside Will, the outside of their thighs touching. ‘She’ll pick up her own pieces and I’ll deal with mine.’

Will had colour in his cheeks that was probably more about the heat of the room than fluster. Hannibal slid his fingers though his hair again, stroking it back before his palm was pressed to a flushed cheek. Will turned, eyes lidding as his nose turned to inhale Hannibal’s scent, strongest at the wrist.

‘He is behind us.’ Hannibal watched Will’s breathing slow, his eyes glazed before he caught himself and twisted his head away from Hannibal’s grip. Hannibal smiled, but tried to keep it to himself. Never too good to be eager in Will’s company; he wouldn’t allow it to be twisted and manipulated into something else.

‘I’ve brought dinner so we can have a date. Iron-rich which is good for pregnancy.’ Hannibal dropped his hand from Will’s body and set about clearing the little table across the room. He’d only been in a handful of days and already had so many cards, mostly from people that were terrified of Will. ‘The doctor says your levels are still very high, Will.’

‘Why is the doctor talking about my condition to you?’ Will took a seat opposite Hannibal, wrists resting on the table either side of the plate that Hannibal had brought from home. He wouldn’t have Will eating from the plastic trays the hospital provided.

‘I have no rights over you, but that is my child your carrying and I think they’re being cautious. You’re not inclined to respond civilly.’ He served the food; slow roasted lamb with a lentil-rich salad. Will watched him, eyes darkly shadowed by the comment regarding his rudeness toward the hospital staff. ‘I noticed a card from the staff at the club. They clearly miss you.’

‘Am I still fired? Are you still selling it? I’d rather you didn’t.’

‘I said lots of things recently. Most, of which, we have discussed and decided were a bad idea.’ When this was over with, more would need to be discussed. For now Will ate like he

was starving, and Hannibal watched him. The headiness of Will's scent was flooding over him, warming his chest and encircling him. He could feel the way his eyes were glazing, entirely sated in his company.

'I'm not apologising,' Will said between mouthfuls. 'You threatened to kill me and the kid. But I accept your apology.'

'Will, you are particularly important to me. Singularly important. I have never been interested in taking anything from you which you do not willingly give. You have given me very little in recent months.'

Will pulled back. 'So you miss my body?'

'I miss your mind more. Can you give me more? Are you willing to?'

'I want to,' Will said. 'But only if I get more from you in return. Everyone thinks you own me, but you don't. Ownership needs to go both ways.' He looked across the table at Will, who gazed back just as firm. An ultimatum perhaps, or something close to it. He considered and nodded. Will's possessive nature was as compelling as his violence. Hannibal enjoyed both parts equally.

Will asked him to stay after they'd finished eating despite visiting hours drawing to a close. Hannibal could see in how his jaw twitched that it was hard for Will to ask. The desire to protect arose, warming Hannibal's chest as he helped Will back into bed.

'I just keep thinking about how all our kids are murderers now. We made them complicit in this sick game. I should be angry, but I'm not. They seem okay. For now they seem okay with what's happened.' Will looked almost irate when Hannibal pushed his shoulders back as he spoke, but he grabbed his wrist and moved Hannibal's fingers until his palm was pressed firm to the side of his stomach. After a pause there was a gentle *pat* against his palm. 'Can you feel that?'

Children had never really been something Hannibal had thought much about having. They seemed an awful waste of energy and losing Mischa had been a heartache that he hadn't ever recovered from. But Will would always be extraordinary, had always forced Hannibal to rethink things. Mason's inadequacy had granted them both a do-over, a chance for something new. Hannibal relished the idea of a child with Will's temperament, with his delicate features and his rabid brutality when provoked. If he would allow a bond, then even better.

'Go to sleep,' he said, when he realised that his hand was still pressed to Will's abdomen and that his eyes were wet. Will laughed at the sight of him, but he closed his eyes and was asleep within minutes.

Chapter End Notes

You have all been great. Thank you again <3

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